

WILD WEST



A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES ETC. OF WESTERN LIFE.

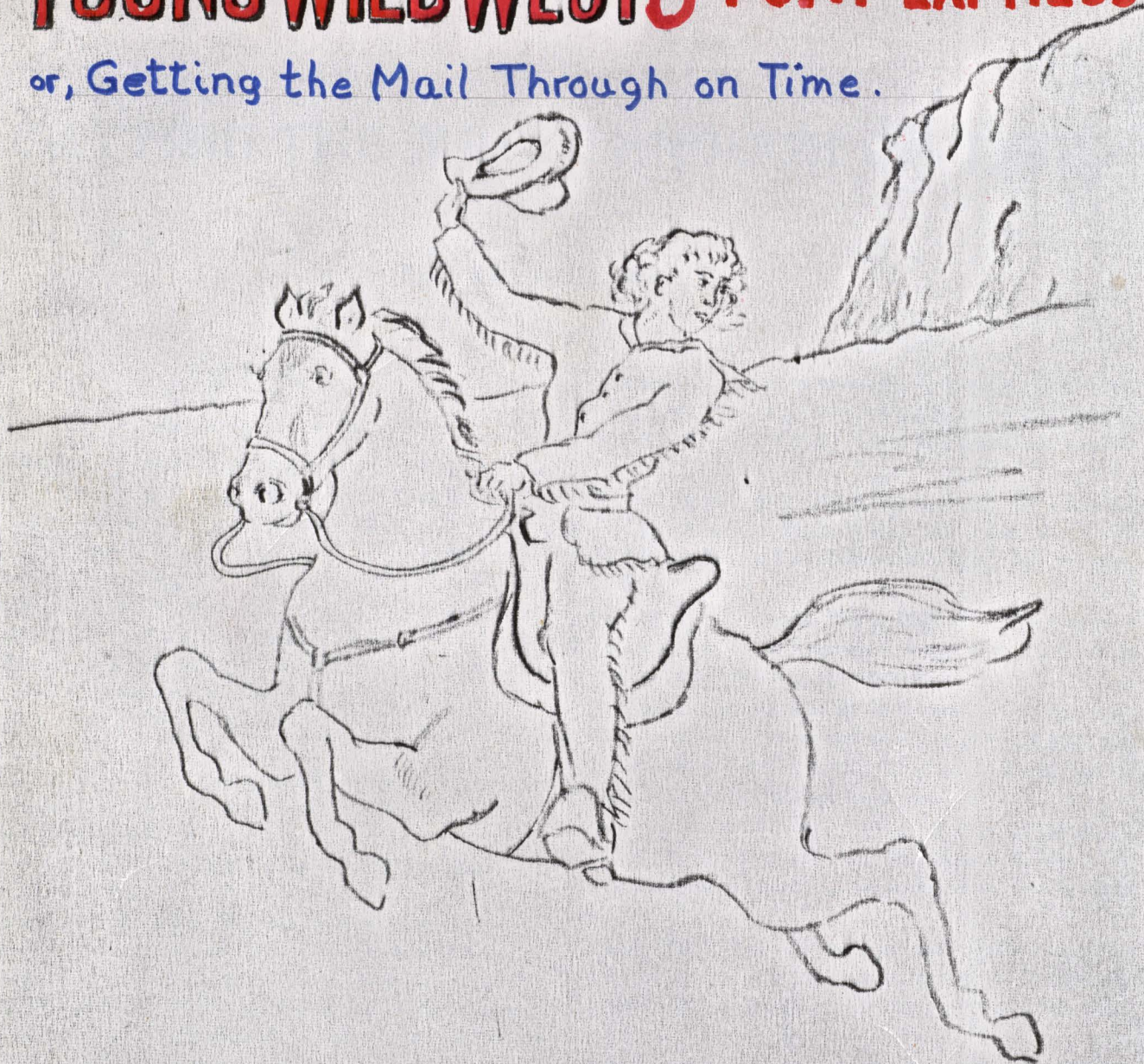
No. 34

NEW YORK, JUNE 12, 1903

Price 5 Cents

YOUNG WILD WEST'S PONY EXPRESS

or, Getting the Mail Through on Time.



WILD WEST WEEKLY

A Magazine Containing Stories, Sketches, Etc., of Western Life.

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Young Wild West's Pony Express;

OR,

GETTING THE MAIL THROUGH ON TIME.

By AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

SHOOTING FOR A PIG.

"Here you go, now! One dollar for a chance on ther fattest pig ever seen in Yaller Dust. Only a dollar, gents; step up an' get a chance. There ain't goin' to be no throwin' of dice; it's goin' to be a shootin' match, an' ther feller what makes ther best score takes ther porker. Come, now! Lay in your chances. Ther money is to go to poor Dick Rannie, what's dyin' by inches from that cough he's got. Ther pig weighs all ther way from four to five hundred, an' we want to raise fifty dollars for Dick, if we kin. You want a chance, young feller? That's right. It's helpin' along a good cause."

The speaker was a rough, bearded man of fifty, whose every appearance would indicate that he had been born and bred in the Wild West.

The scene was in the central part of what was then called Dakota Territory.

It was a rather warm day, and the square in front of the one-story building that had a sign on the front bearing the legend, "Axter House.—Meals at all hours and liquor for sale," was pretty well filled up with a motley crowd consisting of cowboys, miners, troopers, scouts and a few Indians that were supposed to be civilized.

The attraction was a rather small pen that contained a rather large hog. Every one appeared to be very much interested in them, and the fellow who was offering chances on the big porker was doing a pretty good business.

A handsome youth of nineteen or twenty, whose form was as graceful and as perfect as that of an Apollo, had just dismounted from a spirited sorrel steed and purchased a ticket.

He was attired in a neat-fitting hunting-suit composed of buckskin breeches trimmed with red fringe, a blue silk shirt and pearl-colored sombrero with a blue cord and tassel about it.

This was no other than Young Wild West, the Prince of the Saddle, Champion Dead-shot of the West, and one of the richest mine owners in all Dakota.

He had just ridden into the little town of Yellow Dust that was situated near the northern extremity of what was called Fox Ridge, and with him were two of his partners in business and chums through thick and thin.

One was Jim Dart, a boy of about his own age, handsome and athletic, and the other was the famous Indian scout, Cheyenne Charlie, who had not long passed his thirtieth year.

Young Wild West wore his hair long, and it being of a light chestnut hue, his manly form was set off to great advantage by the curling locks that hung down over his shoulders.

Jim Dart did not wear his hair long. The scout, who was tall and as straight as an arrow, wore a dark beard that just fitted his handsome face and gave him the appearance of a man of great judgment and coolness.

As Young Wild West handed over a dollar and took a

chance on the hog that was to be competed for in a shooting match, his two friends hastened to follow his example.

They were attired similarly to him, and as they stood there before the crowd they certainly made the best appearance of any of them, as far as dress and looks went.

If it came to formidable looks, there were plenty there who could lay away over them, for some of the men literally bristled with knives and revolvers.

But our three friends were not without arms, either. The usual belt containing a brace of revolvers of the latest pattern of the times and a hunting knife was buckled about the waist of each of them.

"Strangers, you is welcome as ther day is long," resumed the man who was taking the money for the chances. "When you hand a dollar to me you are doin' it for a good cause. Dick Rannie is on his last legs, an' we want to help him an' his family."

The sale of chances had only begun a few minutes before the arrival of our three friends, and they had not been there more than ten minutes when the whole fifty were disposed of.

The last man to buy a chance was a short, thick-set man of forty, who rode up on a coal-black horse just as the miner was calling out that there was only one left.

As the stranger paid his money and got a number, he stepped back and began to eye Young Wild West and his two partners sharply.

He was rather fancifully attired in a dark jacket of velvet, corduroy knee breeches and patent-leather boots with silver-plated spur rowels at the heels.

On his head was a soft felt hat with the crown dented in at the top, and the red leather belt about his waist had a pair of holsters attached to it, from which the shining handles of a pair of silver-mounted shooters could be seen.

The man was not without jewelry, either, for there were two diamond rings on the fingers of his left hand, a sparkler showed in his ruffled shirt front and a heavy gold chain was suspended from a pocket in his shirt to the buckle of his belt.

"Can you tell me whether this is a good place to put up or not?" he asked of Young Wild West in a low tone.

"That I could not tell you," was the reply. "I only arrived here a few minutes ago and know nothing about the town."

"Ah, a stranger here like myself, eh? Well, let's go in the place and see what it looks like, anyway. Ask your two friends to come. I can see that they are strangers here, too."

Wild looked at Charlie and Jim, and then turning to the stranger, said:

"We were just thinking of going in, so I suppose we might as well go inside together. We, too, want to put up here for a day or two."

As the four turned to leave the crowd the man who had sold the chances called out in a loud voice:

"Gents, ther shootin' match will start at four o'clock sharp, so be on hand. There are plenty of good rifle shots

in this here town, so I guess there'll be some tall shootin' done. This here affair is goin' to be a success, as sure as my name are Sol Sampson!"

The remark was made for the benefit of the strangers, it seemed, for as soon as he spoke the words, Sol Sampson stepped down from the big log he had been standing upon and made for the shanty where the Rannie family lived to turn over the money to them.

Meanwhile our three friends followed the thick-set stranger into the "Axter House," as the hotel was named, after having first tied their horses to the hitching posts that stood in a row at the side of the rough, unpainted building.

"Mine is whiskey," said the stranger, rubbing his hands as though he had them in an imaginary basin and was washing them.

"I will take a temperance drink with you," answered Young Wild West.

"So will I," spoke up Jim Dart.

"Well, a drop of good liquor won't hurt me, I reckon," remarked Cheyenne Charlie.

Though he seemed a trifle surprised at what the two boys called for, the man said nothing.

When the drinks had been swallowed he put his hand in an inner pocket and pulled out a handful of cards.

He handed one to each of the three.

On the cards was inscribed:

"Percy Pearsall, Neverdie Mine, Neverdie, Col."

"Now you know who I am, gentlemen," he remarked. "I suppose you have no objection in letting me know who you are?"

"None whatever," replied the young Prince of the Saddle. "I am Young Wild West, and these gentlemen are my partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart. We belong in Weston, a small town in the Hills, and are interested in mining there."

"Ah! I am real glad to know you," and he shook hands with them in a very hearty manner.

But in spite of the man's apparent friendliness, there was something about him that Wild did not like.

It struck him that Percy Pearsall, as he called himself, had journeyed to the little town of Yellow Dust for some crooked purpose.

Our hero's experience had taught him always to look upon affable strangers with distrust until he found them out.

Young Wild West and his two partners had been summoned to the place by a Government official who had established temporary headquarters at Fort Unity, which was located on the banks of the Missouri River about forty miles below Yellow Dust.

Wild had been asked in a communication if he would undertake the task of carrying the mails from the fort to Owl Flats, a military station and mining settlement on the Owl River a hundred miles distant.

In that section the marauding bands of Sioux Indians and outlaws made it very dangerous traveling between the

two points, and that was why it was that the mail seldom got delivered from one point to another.

At either end of the hundred-mile stretch the facilities were better for the transportation of the bags, and little or no trouble was given to the carriers.

When Young Wild West received the request he promptly talked it over with his two friends, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, and the result was that he decided to undertake to form a Pony Express route between Fort Unity and Owl Flats.

The daring young Prince of the Saddle was offered five thousand dollars if he could succeed in establishing the route and run it without losing any of the mail for one month.

He had filled out the papers and signed them, and then forwarded them to the Government official at the fort.

Then, in less than two weeks later, he and his two friends had been summoned to the fort.

They were on their way there when they rode into Yellow Dust, which was located nearly half-way between the two points of the mail route.

Wild figured on the three of them doing the task.

One of them would be at each end of the route and one at Yellow Dust continually.

It would be what is termed relay riding.

That would always leave a man and horse fresh and ready to relieve the rider when he had traveled his part of the distance.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when the three arrived at Yellow Dust in time to take chances on the "big pig," as the miners called it.

It was the last day of May, and as the contract was to begin on the first of June, our friends must necessarily be at the fort to start in on the morrow.

When Wild told Percy Pearsall that they wanted to put up at the hotel he did not mean that they wanted to stay over night; he simply meant that they wanted to get something to eat, so they could proceed on their journey with full stomachs.

And as they had eaten nothing since early morning, they were pretty hungry.

"I tell you what I want," said Wild, looking at the man who had been so anxious to make friends with them, "I want something to eat."

"So do I," was the quick reply. "Landlord, just get something ready in the line of a good, hearty dinner for four of us. Never mind the expense, but hurry it up."

"All right," replied the hotel keeper. "I can give you a layout of beef steak, bacon and eggs, coffee and hot corn muffins in just half an hour. You couldn't beat that much, could you?"

"No," laughed Jim Dart. "That is good enough. You know your business, landlord."

"I reckon that any one who knows Billy Axter will say that," was the retort, and away he went to the kitchen to give the order.

"That feller is bound to push himself ahead, I reckon,"

observed Cheyenne Charlie, as Pearsall moved up to the other end of the bar for a match to light the stump of a cigar he had in his mouth.

"Yes," answered Wild. "I can't say that I like him. It strikes me that he is trying to get on friendly terms with us for some purpose."

"Maybe he is a gambler," suggested Jim.

"I was thinking that way myself."

"Well, if he is he will get fooled, for we don't want to get in any game, even if we had time to stay here."

"No; I never get in a game unless I do it for the purpose of finding out something. We will simply eat our dinner, and then if they are ready to shoot for the pig we will try our hands, and then be off for Fort Unity. Charlie, you had better see to it that our horses are given a little rubbing down, and then they can be chewing their oats while we are taking in the shooting match."

The scout at once went out and turned their horses over to the care of the stableman.

"Have a fresh cigar, Mr. Pearsall," said Wild, as the thick-set man came back to them.

"Don't care if I do."

Our hero called for the best in the house and each took one.

"I will keep mine until after dinner," he said. "I always enjoy a cigar right after eating."

"Ah, I see! You are a great smoker, but no drinker."

"I smoke now and then, but never drink anything intoxicating."

"A good point, no doubt; but I don't happen to be built that way. But say! Who do you think is going to win that pig?"

"That would be a hard thing for me to say. I don't know what kind of marksmen there are in this town."

"But you know what sort of a marksman you are yourself, don't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, I know what I am in that line, too. I'll just make you a friendly wager of a hundred dollars that I will come nearer to winning the pig than you. Come, now! Take me up on it, and we will give the winnings to the poor family the pig is being chanced off for."

"I'll take that bet!" exclaimed Charlie, before Wild could get a chance to speak. "I'll bet a hundred Wild will beat you."

"All right. I am glad to see that there is some sporting blood in one of you, at least. Landlord, just hold this money, will you?"

"Certainly," said the proprietor of the Axter House. "What is the bet, gentlemen?"

Pearsall explained.

Then the proprietor put the money in his wallet and went right on doing business, as though the making of the bet was nothing to speak of.

Pearsall talked on at a rattling pace until the dinner was announced.

Then the four went into the roughly furnished dining-room and sat down at the table.

It certainly was a good, wholesome meal that had been prepared for them, and they did full justice to it.

It was four o'clock when they got up and went out.

Pearsall paid the bill, and then lighting their cigars, they went outside.

A target had been put up at a distance of two hundred and fifty yards, and the men were getting ready to shoot.

The bull's-eye of the target was a black circle about the size of a door knob, and right in the center of this was a white spot of the dimensions of a pea.

This was so small that it could not be seen at that distance, but as it was in the exact center of the bull's-eye, it was decided that the bullet that came nearest to hitting the white spot would be the winner.

The men shot in turn as they had bought the chances.

Percy Pearsall was the last man to shoot, he having bought the last chance, and Wild and his two partners were pretty near him.

There were just fifty men to participate, and only one shot apiece was to be allowed, unless there was a tie.

It was to be run off in quick order, so Sol Sampson, the maanger of the shoot, said.

The marksmen now started in, firing as fast as the results could be announced.

It was not until the twentieth man had fired that the bull's-eye got touched at all, and then it was right on the edge.

The thirty-ninth man came a trifle nearer to the center, and a cheer went up from his friends.

Wild's number was forty-two, and his turn soon came.

"Here's ther last of ther white spot!" cried Cheyenne Charlie.

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTLAW'S CAVE.

In a small back room of a shanty saloon in the little town of Owl Flats on the same day that Young Wild West arrived at Yellow Dust, two men were seated drinking and smoking.

There was nothing much about them to distinguish them from the good and bad element of the place, as they looked like the average miner to be found in the rustling town.

But their conversation showed that they were not so much interested in the claim they owned as they wanted others to think.

They were of the sort who believe in accumulating money without working for it.

They were gamblers, sneak thieves, ruffians and desperadoes combined, just as the occasion required for them to show up in either of their points.

And notwithstanding all this, they posed as honest men among those whom they wanted to be friendly with.

"I tell you, Burt," said one of them, striking his fist upon the table vehemently, "we mustn't allow this business of ourn to git nipped in the bud. It has been paying alto-

gether too good for that. We have been doing the work and raking in the money, and the Sioux have been gittin' ther blame for it. We ain't goin' to allow our business to be disturbed, I kin tell yer!"

"Not much we ain't, Dadson; not much we ain't. What sort of a feller kin this Young Wild West be, anyway, that Captain Percy is so alarmed about him?"

"I don't know, but ther captain says he's a terror an' has got nerve an' grit enough for ten."

"An' he's goin' to undertake to run ther mail through on time for ther Government?"

"That's what Captain Percy says."

"Cap's a putty shrewd man, or he wouldn't have got hold of this."

"Well, I s'pose it are his business to know all that's goin' on."

As the man called Dadson said this, he poured out a drink from the bottle that sat on the table before them.

Burt followed his example, and then both took a drink.

"I s'pose this Young Wild West will have a whole gang to help him git ther mail through," observed the latter, smacking his lips and placing his glass back on the table.

"I don't know. That's what Captain Percy went over to Yellow Dust to-day for."

"He ought to be there now. He left afore daylight, you know."

"Yes, it's five now. He's been there some time. His horse is a good one, you know, an' sixty miles won't hurt such an animal as that is."

"Well, it ain't likely he'll be back before a couple of days. I s'pose we won't bother ther feller what comes through with ther mail bags ther day after to-morrow for the first."

"No. We ain't to interfere with no one until ther captain comes to give us orders. He'll know jest what to do when he comes, you know."

The two rascals kept on talking and drinking until sunset.

Then they got up, went ont into the barroom and settling their score, left the place.

They had two good-looking horses tied outside, and mounting them, they rode off to the east.

The trail they were following ran right along the right bank of the Owl River, a small stream that flowed into the broad Missouri a hundred miles to the east.

The two men rode at a faster gait as soon as they were outside the limits of the little town.

It was a pretty dark night, but they did not slacken speed, a fact that showed they were used to the rather rough trail.

When they had covered a trifle over ten miles they brought their horses down to a walk and began to act in a cautious manner.

They proceeded on for perhaps a quarter of a mile in this way, and then, as he turned his horse and started back, the man called Burt said:

"I guess ther coast is clear enough. There don't seem to be any one on ther trail to-night."

"Yes; it is safe enough to make for ther cave, I reckon," responded Dadson. "It was safe enough when we come past

it, but there's nothin' like bein' perfectly sure, as ther captain says. It's his orders to act this way every time we come, so we will do it, no matter how certain we are that there ain't no one, either whites or reds, watchin' us."

Back they walked their horses for perhaps two hundred yards, and then pausing long enough to cast a searching glance both up and down the trail, they suddenly rode into a narrow pass that a brook trickled through and emptied into the river.

Along the pebbly bottom of the brook the horses splashed until finally they came to a sloping bank that was just around a sharp turn.

Then they stepped out upon dry ground and the riders dismounted.

One of the men uttered a low whistle, which was almost instantly repeated by some one close by.

Then he whistled twice, and a silence of perhaps ten seconds followed.

The two villains waited impatiently, their hands on the bridles of the horses.

But suddenly out of the darkness a whispered voice exclaimed:

"Are you loyal?"

"We are!" they answered in unison.

"To whom?"

"Captain Percy Pearsall."

"Then enter."

"You was long enough about lettin' us in," growled Burt, as he led his horse into the narrow mouth of a cave. "What's ther matter with you, anyway?"

"There's a little trouble inside," was the reply. "Ther gal ther captain brought here has got out of ther place he had her fastened in, an' she's got a knife an' a revolver which she took from ther squaw what was supposed to be watchin' her. She says she won't go back in her prison, an' I really think she will fight."

"Well, she can't git outside, kin she? What's ther use of makin' a fuss about it?" Dadson said.

"Maybe you kin git her to put down ther shooter an' go back," answered the guard, drily.

"I reckon I kin," was the reply.

"Well, come on in, then."

The two led their horses through a short passage and turned to the left, where the guard took charge of them and proceeded to take off the saddles and bridles.

This was the stable, and to the right was the regular entrance to an irregular shaped cave that was very roomy and full of jutting corners and alcoves.

As the newcomers entered, they saw, by the aid of a swinging lamp that hung from the center of the underground apartment, a rather startling sight.

A young girl of perhaps eighteen years of age stood in a corner with a revolver leveled at two or three men and half a dozen squaws.

The latter were all armed, but not one of them had drawn a weapon.

The girl was very pretty, and as she stood there, her eyes

flashing defiance to the crowd, she made an imposing picture, one that a person was not likely to forget for a while.

"I am going out of here," she was saying in a ringing tone as Burt and Dadson came in. "I am going out, and the man or woman who makes a move to stop me will die!"

"Ugh! Put down pistol and be good," admonished one of the squaws.

"I will put you down if you dare make a move to interfere with me!" was the quick reply. "You have no right to keep me in this place against my will, and I am going to leave."

She took a step forward, and the crowd involuntarily fell back.

They did not like the looks of the revolver in her hands.

Dadson now stepped forward.

He was a quick-witted sort of a fellow, and an idea had suddenly popped into his head.

"Don't hit her with that club!" he cried suddenly, looking as though he was talking to some one behind the girl.

The ruse worked to perfection, for she lowered the weapon instantly and looked behind her.

And before she realized that she had been neatly tricked Dadson seized her by the wrists and quickly rendered her helpless.

"You are a lot of fools to let her scare you!" he exclaimed. "I s'pose if I hadn't showed up just as I did you'd have let her gone out."

The girl now grew hysterical.

She had made a bold attempt to escape and had lost.

"Now, I guess you'll git right back to your quarters an' behave yourself," her captor resumed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for tryin' to run away from ther captain, when he loves you so madly."

Shrieking loudly for help, the girl was borne into an alcove that had been boarded up so as to make a separate apartment of it.

But before putting her in there, Dadson made sure that she had no more weapons.

The rough door was fastened by a bar, and then one of the squaws took up her position on a stool before it.

Though Dadson was not an officer in the outlaw band—for outlaw band it certainly was that occupied the cave as a headquarters—he was much looked up to just then by those present.

Of the three men who had been in the place when the two villains entered, two of them were half-breeds and the other a white man.

Counting the guard, who was also white, there were now six men there and as many squaws, the most of whom were young and comely looking.

The latter were the wives of the outlaws, and the handsome white girl was to become the bride of the captain, so it was said by them.

The girl, whose name was Emma Michels, was a step-daughter of the surgeon at Fort Unity.

She had been kidnapped through the aid of her step-

father, who was a villain and wanted to get some property left by her mother.

This man, who held a good position under the Government, was in league with Captain Percy Pearsall in the robbing of the mails, and from this it will be seen that he was not only a villain, but a traitor, as well.

His name was John Leon—Surgeon Leon—and was deemed honest and trustworthy by his superiors.

His step-daughter had been kidnapped with the understanding that she should be made way with, but after he had seen what a pretty girl she was, Percy Pearsall decided to try and win her hand in marriage.

He cared nothing for the surgeon, and he had already figured it out during the three short days of the girl's captivity, that he would marry her and then treat her step-father to a surprise some day by taking the fortune that rightfully belonged to her from him.

So it will be seen that it was a case of diamond cut diamond, and that the poor, motherless girl involved a whole lot.

Pearsall had told Emma Michels how her step-father had bargained with him to put her out of the way, and from the way she had been treated since her mother's death, the girl did not doubt it.

But she refused absolutely to entertain the thought of marrying the outlaw leader.

Then he had given her a week in which to make up her mind, telling her refusal to wed him meant her death.

The apartment Emma occupied in the outlaws' headquarters was fitted up with no small degree of luxury, and she was allowed the best of food and attention from the Indian woman who had been designated to take charge of her.

But that was nothing to her just then.

She wanted her liberty.

CHAPTER III.

YOUNG WILD WEST WINS THE SHOOTING MATCH.

"Do you mean that?" asked Pearsall, as Cheyenne Charlie said it would be the last of the white spot in the bull's-eye when Young Wild West stepped up to take his turn at shooting for the pig.

"I certainly did mean it," retorted the scout. "I never say anything I don't mean."

"Well, I'll bet you five hundred dollars that he don't touch the white spot with a bullet."

"It's a go!"

Wild, who was ready to shoot, waited until the money had been placed in the hands of Sol Sampson, the manager of the affair.

Then he placed the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, and taking a quick aim, fired.

There was a deathly silence for the space of a moment, and then the man who was attending the target and announcing the results, called out:

"Plumb center! Ther white spot's gone!"

Instantly every eye was turned upon the handsome young dead-shot.

"What did I tell you, Pearsall?" exclaimed Charlie. "I knowed jest what I was talkin' about, an' that's why I said it. There ain't a man livin' who can beat Young Wild West at shootin' with a rifle."

"It looks that way," retorted Pearsall, shrugging his shoulders, "but it might be that there are some who can hold their own with him."

"Yes; I don't doubt that."

"I might, you know."

"Well, you are a good one if you do," remarked the man who had held the record up to the time Wild had fired.

It was now Jim Dart's turn.

It took some time for all those who wanted to examine the target to get through, and when they did Jim stepped up.

The boy did his level best, and succeeded in placing a bullet in the bull's-eye that touched the edge of the hole Wild had made in the center of it.

Cheyenne Charlie followed and hit on the opposite side at about the same distance from the center.

"The three best shots so far," said Sol Sampson.

The others who came before it was Percy Pearsall's turn did not succeed in getting up to the score of our three friends, and that left them still ahead of all hands, with Wild a sure winner, unless Pearsall tied him.

"Before I shoot," said the thick-set man, "I want you to plug up the hole where the white spot was. I might shoot in the same spot, and then I would not have the credit of it, you know."

"All right," answered Sampson. "I reckon no one will object to that. You are ther last man to shoot."

"I have no objection, I'm sure," spoke up our hero. "Go ahead."

Sampson chewed up a bit of paper, and making a little ball of it, pushed it into the bullet hole.

Then he came back and told Pearsall to go ahead and shoot.

He toed the mark and placed the rifle to his shoulder.

The next instant the report rang out.

"In ther same place!" shouted the man at the target. "Ther piece of paper is gone!"

A look of triumph crossed the face of Pearsall.

"I told you that I knew how to shoot," he said to Charlie.

"Well, I reckon you do," was the reply.

"It is a tie," declared Sampson. "You have got to shoot it off."

"Now comes the opportunity to see who possesses the most nerve," said Pearsall.

"That's right," retorted Young Wild West. "Nerve is the thing that generally counts. You must never expect to get very far ahead in this world if you don't have nerve. Now, then, Mr. Pearsall, I suppose I must shoot first, as you tied me."

"Yes; I think that is proper."

"Well, here goes, then."

The bullet hole in the center had been stuffed with a ball of paper again, and our hero raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired for the second time at the target.

"He ain't lost his nerve any!" yelled the man at the target. "He hit it plumb in ther center ag'in."

At this Pearsall showed signs of being just a trifle nervous.

"All right," he said.

The hole was stuffed again, and then he took his second shot.

"You lose!" came the shout from the man. "You've made the hole a little bigger on ther left side, an' a piece of ther paper is still in it."

A scowl came over the brow of the defeated man when he heard this.

"I want to see the target," he exclaimed. "Don't handle it, anybody, until I see that this report is correct."

He walked away over to the target, but one look satisfied him that the report was a correct one.

"Now, you see who had ther most nerve, I reckon," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "Come, boys, I guess we have got to be movin'. It is gittin' toward six o'clock."

Wild walked over to the master of ceremonies.

"I suppose I am the winner of the pig?" he remarked.

"Yes; an' you won it by two of ther greatest shots I ever seen."

"Well, give it to Dick Rannie, with my compliments."

"Who will I tell him it was who give it to him?"

"Young Wild West."

"Ah, thank you, Young Wild West."

Our friends now went into the hotel where Charlie collected the bet he had won from Pearsall.

Then he went over and gave the whole amount to Sol Sampson, with instructions to present it to the sick man's family.

Percy Pearsall was nowhere to be seen when the three mounted their horses and left the town.

They should have started before, but they could not resist the temptation to stay and take part in the shooting match.

"I wonder where our friend has gone?" remarked Jim, as they rapidly left the town behind.

"I have no idea," replied Wild. "He is a fellow I do not like. He very near gave himself away when I beat him at shooting. I could see by the expression on his face that he was very mad over it. We must be on the lookout for Percy Pearsall, as he calls himself, for I am confident that we have not seen the last of him."

"That's my opinion, exactly!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie. "Ther feller ain't no good, an' I'll bet on it. I won some of his money, an' I'm glad of it, too."

The three had a ride of forty miles ahead of them, and though their horses were not any fresher than they ought to be, they expected to make the distance before daylight, and have two or three good rests on the way.

One thing in their favor, the trail was pretty level and smooth, and this helped them considerably.

They rode on at an easy pace, and the miles were gradually covered.

When perhaps fifteen miles were covered they came to a halt, and gave the horses a rest.

As all were valuable steeds, more especially Wild's sorrel, they attended to them carefully, giving them a good rubbing down to keep the stiffness out of them.

When they stopped again they had covered another fifteen miles.

The horses did not appear to be any more tired than they were when they started the last time, and just as they were thinking of going on for the last ten miles of their journey, a light suddenly flashed in the bushes ahead of them.

It appeared as though it was made by a lantern, for it was moving off to the left.

They sat still in the saddle, and listened.

Then they heard footsteps.

"Come on," said Wild. "We will ride over and see who it is that walks around this lonely part of the country at this hour of the night."

As the horses started forward the light suddenly disappeared.

But this was nothing more than Young Wild West had expected.

The man with the lantern was not supposed to know whether they were friends or foes.

"Hello, there!" called out Young Wild West. "Can you tell us how much further we have got to go to reach Fort Unity?"

There was no reply, so the boy urged his horse forward and rode boldly to the spot where the light had disappeared.

Then for the first time he saw a lonely little cabin standing back a few feet from the roadside.

It was nearly covered with vines and the branches of trees that hung down upon it.

All was in darkness, and everything was as silent as the grave.

Wild felt as though he ought to be answered, so he rode up to the door and gave a knock on it.

"Who's there?" came from within.

"Three travelers on their way to Fort Unity," he answered. "Can you tell us how much further we have got to go?"

"About ten miles," came the answer from within. "Go on, now! I want to get to sleep."

"You could not have wanted to sleep very bad, or you would not have been running around with a lantern so late," and with that our hero turned his horse and started away from the spot, followed by his companions.

They had not gone more than a dozen yards when a rifle shot rang out, and Young Wild West felt a sting on his left side.

Cheyenne Charlie happened to be looking in the direction of the cabin when the shot was fired, and he saw the flash come from a little window.

In the twinkling of an eye he was blazing away at the window with his revolver.

The first shot he let go caused a sharp cry of pain to come from the window, which showed that he had hit the fellow who had fired at them.

"Whew!" exclaimed Wild, as he pressed his hand to his side and found blood. "I guess I got touched that time."

"Did the bullet go in?" Jim asked, anxiously, as they rode behind a group of trees and came to a halt.

"No; I guess not. Ah! it just grazed me close enough to cut my clothing and break the skin. Spitfire stepped into a rut just as the shot was fired, and that was the means of saving my life."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Do!" spoke up Charlie. "Why, raid that cabin, an' either kill or capture them that's in it. It is a pretty bad man who would fire a shot like that. I winged ther feller who done it, but I guess I didn't hurt him much. He hol-lered more from surprise than anything else. Here goes."

The scout had unslung his rifle, and placing it to his shoulder he began firing at the windows in the cabin.

No answering shots came, so when he had fired half a dozen times, our hero told him to desist.

"Let them alone for to-night," he said. "I am satisfied that there is more than one man in the cabin. But we will investigate later. This is on the line of the Pony Express route, you know. We will all pass that cabin many times during the next month."

"That's right," observed Jim. "Come on, Charlie. We will see how it looks to-morrow in the daylight."

The scout grumbly assented, but it was not exactly his wish to leave the place till the coward who had shot at Wild had been punished.

Wild's wound was nothing more than a scratch, as the heat from the bullet had stung him more than anything else.

When they had covered about half a mile he halted and allowed Jim to apply a piece of plaster to it; then he was ready to proceed.

It was a little past one when the three rode into the settlement near the fort.

There was no hotel there, so they headed straight for the barracks.

After no little waiting they were at length received and given places to turn in for the night.

The officer in charge had been expecting their arrival, so when they had satisfied him who they were it was all right.

They arose at the sound of the bugle in the morning, and after eating with the officers, the U. S. Mail official sent for them.

"So you are here on time, I see," he observed, as he shook the hand of Young Wild West.

"Yes, colonel; I always make it a point to do as I agree to. But I came near to not getting here, for all that."

"Why, how is that?" and the official looked surprised.

"I was shot at about ten miles from here. Some one

in a little cabin, that stands at the side of the trail and is almost concealed from view by overhanging vines, sent a bullet after us as we passed. It was meant for my heart, I guess, but my horse happened to step in a rut just as the shot was fired, and the bullet merely grazed my skin. See! here is where it cut my shirt."

"That is rather odd," remarked the colonel, when he had made an examination. "Have you any idea how it was that you came to be fired upon?"

"Nothing occurred to make any one fire at us," and then the boy told just what happened.

"Well, I suppose you are used to being shot at, or you would not have taken the contract to run the mail through to Owl Flats for a month. I think you have got a rather tough job ahead of you, but as you have signed the contract I suppose you will try it, anyhow?"

"Oh, yes. I will try it; and I will succeed, too. The mail goes over twice a week, and comes back twice, according to the contract, and as there are three of us to do it, we will get it through on time."

"Yes; you can do it easy enough if you are not interrupted by the thieving Sioux. We are doing our best to catch them, so you will be protected considerably by the soldiers. It was my idea about offering the five thousand dollars to the person who could establish a route between here and Owl Flats, and run it one month without losing any of the mail. In addition to that sum, which is put up as a sort of a prize, you will receive sixty dollars per month as your regular pay, or pro rata, if you fail to hold the job a month."

"Very well; when will the mail be ready to start with?"

"At one o'clock."

"Very well."

"You are not going to back out, then?" asked the colonel.

"Certainly not."

"Good! That settles it, then."

CHAPTER IV.

WILD RIDES OVER TO OWL FLATS.

Wild, Charlie and Jim were then called upon to sign some more documents, which they did, after first reading them over carefully.

"There is a great deal of 'red tape' about this business, I'll admit," observed the colonel, who had been appointed by the authorities at Washington to perfect that portion of the mail route. "But it is strict necessity, as it is the only way to run things straight."

"I don't mind signing papers," retorted Wild. "But I always do make it a point to read over carefully what is on a document before I sign it. Everybody should do this, I think."

"You are right on that point. Many a man has signed his last dollar away, not knowing it. But what you have signed here is simply that if you fulfill your contract and get the mails through on time for one month you are to

receive five thousand dollars as a prize; otherwise you will only receive pay at the rate of sixty dollars a month, and will have to pay your help out of your own pocket."

"I understand it perfectly," and Young Wild West smiled as he turned to his two partners.

"Boys," he added, a moment later; "if we make a miss of it, we will make rather poor wages, won't we?"

"Well, if I understand aright, you have large mining interests in the Black Hills, and that you only accepted the proposition to come here, to show that you can do a thing when you once attempt it?"

"That's just it, exactly!" exclaimed our hero. "I have signed this contract, and now I am going to put it through."

"And if you do, you will do a whole lot that could not be accomplished before. Why, there has been at least twenty thousand dollars stolen from the mail-bags in the past seven months, and three men have lost their lives."

This assertion did not make our friends feel the least bit uneasy.

They were well used to danger of all sorts, and felt quite equal to the task of running the Pony Express through from the Fort to Owl Flats.

After all arrangements were made they went out to the stable where their horses were, and found them in the best of condition.

Well used to long journeys, the animals were as fresh as ever.

"Now," said Wild, "we may as well settle as to how we are going to run this thing. One of us has got to remain here, one has got to stop at Yellow Dust, and the other must ride on to Owl Flats. It is now nine o'clock, so I would suggest that the one who will have to push on to Owl Flats, starts right away, so his horse will have a chance to rest before he sets out from that place with the mail. We had better draw lots to see who will take the places."

"Good," answered Charlie, picking up three straws. "Now, I'll break these into three different lengths. Ther one who draws ther short one will stay here to take the mail bags at one o'clock; he who draws ther next to ther shortest will ride on to Yellow Dust with ther one who goes out with ther mail. Then, whichever one gits ther long straw will go right away for Owl Flats, an' wait there till ther mail is brought in. How's that suit you?"

"First rate," replied Wild.

"It couldn't be fairer," said Jim. "Though I don't care how it turns out."

Charlie arranged the straws so they could not see him, and when he was ready he came over and held out the ends of them.

Jim drew first, but as he did not know the exact lengths of the straws, he was not sure which one he had.

Wild came next, and he got one that was longer than Jim's.

Of course, the remaining one belonged to Charlie, and when he held it up it was found to be the shortest of the three.

"That settles it," exclaimed Wild. "I have got to push on to Owl Flats."

"And I have got to stop at Yellow Dust," added Jim.

"That gives me ther privilege of carryin' ther first mail-bags from here, then," remarked the scout. "Well, I am satisfied, if you fellers are."

"We are all satisfied, I guess," answered Wild, and then he went right to work saddling his horse.

In a few minutes he was ready to start, so he went to the temporary office of the colonel, and told him how they had arranged things.

It being satisfactory, he waved his hand to his partners, and rode away.

The Pony Express route had now opened.

Wild rode along at an easy gait till he came within about a mile of the cabin at the side of the trail, where he had been shot at.

Then he brought the sorrel down to a walk.

He had just done this when he perceived a horseman riding slowly toward him.

As the horseman drew nearer he saw that he wore the uniform of a surgeon in the army.

"Good morning, surgeon," said Young Wild West, as the rider brought his horse to a halt. "You belong to the Fort, I suppose?"

"Yes," was the reply. "I presume you are the young fellow who has contracted to put the mail through?"

"Yes, sir; that is exactly who I am."

"Your name is Young Wild West?"

"That's right."

"Well, I wish you luck in your undertaking. Good morning!"

"Good morning," answered our hero, and then as the surgeon rode on he nodded to himself.

"There is something wrong about that man, I'll wager," he muttered.

The boy did not like the looks of the surgeon, and when he once grew suspicious of a man he was generally right in his belief.

As the boy came in sight of the lone cabin he was surprised to see an old man sitting on a bench in front of the door whittling a stick.

"Mornin', young feller," said the old man, as he rode up.

"Good morning, my friend," retorted Wild, bringing his horse to a halt. "You appear to be more civil than you were last night."

"What do you mean by that?" and the man showed signs of genuine surprise.

"You don't know anything about what happened here last night, then?"

"I reckon I don't, since I wasn't here. I only rode over from Yeller Dust this mornin'. I ain't been back half an hour yet. You are ther young feller they call Young Wild West, ain't yer?"

"Yes," answered our hero, rather puzzled, for he felt that the old man was speaking the truth.

"An' you won ther pig in ther shootin' match over there yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"I know all about it. I was there an' seen it all. I had a chance on ther pig myself, but my shootin' wasn't nowhere alongside of yourn an' that feller what tied you."

"When did you see the man who tied me, last?"

"I ain't seen him since right after ther shootin' match."

"He was not at Yellow Dust when you left this morning, then?"

"No. Leastwise, I didn't see anything of him."

"Well, good morning. I've got a long ride ahead of me."

"Good mornin', Young Wild West."

Wild was just about to ride on, when he thought of something.

"Who shot your windows out?" he asked, reining in his horse again.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old fellow, "I've been wonderin' who done it myself. You are ther second one to ask me that within ten minutes. I reckon that one or both of you knows somethin' about it."

"Who asked you beside myself?"

"Surgeon Leon from ther Fort."

"He just left you a few minutes ago, didn't he?"

"Yes. But, say! Do you know anythin' about my winders bein' shot out?"

"Yes; I know something about it. A friend of mine did it somewhere around twelve o'clock last night."

"He did, hey?" and the old man showed signs of anger. "Well, I reckon he'll pay for ther damage he done, then. There's a whole lot of blood in the house, too. I knowed some one was in there, an' I made up my mind that either you or ther surgeon knowed somethin' about it by ther way you talked. But I was waitin' for you to give yourselves away."

"Well, see here, my friend. I'll tell you all about it, if you are sure you don't know."

"I don't know."

"Well, I will tell you, then," and Wild did tell him just what happened the night before when he passed that way in the company of Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart.

"Some one was runnin' around here with a lantern, hey?" gasped the old fellow. "An' some one shot at you from the house, did they? Well, I'd jest give five dollars to know who it was that kin git in an' out of my shanty as they feel like it, when I'm away. This ain't ther first time it has happened, either. Some one was in here ther other night, when ther gal from ther Fort went away an' ain't been seen since. It's gittin' to be a putty how-de-do that a feller can't go way from his house for a few hours, without havin' some one to come along an' upset things for him! Young Wild West, I believe jest what you have told me, an' I wish you'd try an' find out who it is that's comin' around here."

"Haven't you any idea, at all?" asked our hero.

"Ther only one I kin lay it to is Surgeon Leon, though I wouldn't like him to hear that I said so."

"Well, I will ride back and forth past here every now and then for the next month, and if you will keep an eye on the surgeon and the man who tied me at the shooting match, and tell me what they are doing when you happen to see them, I'll try and find out for you."

"You will?"

"Yes; you get a little evidence that they are not exactly what they make out to be, and I'll do the rest. You said a girl had disappeared from the Fort, didn't you?"

"Yes; she's a step-darter of ther surgeon, an' a mighty putty gal she is, too. He's offered a big reward for her return, but I don't think he seems to be so awful anxious about her, for all that."

Young Wild West was much interested in what the old man said.

He now began to think that Surgeon Leon was a very suspicious character, and that he would bear considerable watching.

He talked with the hermit for ten minutes longer, and learned enough to make him believe that the surgeon knew something about the disappearance of his step-daughter.

He also learned that the old fellow's name was Gunnison, and that he had built the cabin and had lived there alone ever since the Fort had been established ten miles beyond, on the bank of the Missouri.

"That old fellow has told me nothing but the truth," he mused, as he rode away. "There is something peculiar about me being shot at last night. It looks as though the robbers of the mail have begun their work to keep me from going through. But I will defeat them. I am going to run this Pony Express for one month if I have to wade through blood!"

He kept on riding, and reached Yellow Dust at one o'clock.

He stopped at the same place he had dined the day before with his partners and Percy Pearsall.

After he had seen to putting up his horse he walked into the barroom and ordered dinner.

When it was ready he stepped inside, and was surprised to see Pearsall sitting at the table.

The man's left arm was bandaged at the wrist, and Wild noticed that he showed signs of being uneasy when he took a seat opposite him.

"How are you, Mr. Pearsall?" he observed pleasantly.

"Pretty well, Mr. West," was the reply. "I met with a little accident this morning. I cut my wrist."

"Ah! that is too bad."

After that neither had much to say, but Wild was doing considerable thinking as he ate his dinner.

Pearsall got up and excused himself before Wild was through, and that was the last he saw of him that day.

After dinner our hero called the landlord of the place, and arranged for the relay riders to put up there during the month.

One of them would be there all the time, so he got the rate reduced.

It was a trifle after two when he set out for the sixty-mile ride to Owl Flats.

Spitfire was a tough horse, and he hoped to make the distance before it grew very late in the night.

One thing, the road was a pretty good one.

It ran parallel with the Owl River, some places being right on the bank of it.

Wild allowed the spirited sorrel to travel at his own gait, and the miles rapidly slipped by.

Just before darkness set in he met a detachment of eight cavalymen who were doing patrol duty on the trail.

He halted, and had a talk with them, and when they learned that he was the one who had contracted to carry the mail for a month, they showed much interest in him.

"We will help you all we can," said the lieutenant in command. "But I am afraid that you and your friends will have a hard time of it. There has been no mail through in over a week now, and that was run by a stage-coach line, which has now gone out of business, on account of losing three men, and the business being poor in the line of passengers."

"Well, you help me all you can, and I guess we will get through all right," replied Wild. "This Pony Express will be something new, and we will surprise these mail robbers. My two partners are very nifty fellows, and they can generally tell a good man from a bad one at the first sight. They know how to shoot straight, too, and have good horses."

"I wish you would give me your name, and also the names of your partners, together with a description of them," said the lieutenant.

Young Wild West did so, and one of the men, who had heard of him, asked to shake his hand.

"Lieutenant," he remarked, "if any one can get the mail through, Young Wild West can. I have heard enough of him to know that he seldom fails in anything he undertakes."

"You mustn't flatter me," laughed Wild.

"I am not giving to making flattering remarks," was the earnest reply. "I mean what I say, and I hope you will have the best of luck in this."

Our hero went on, and without meeting any one else, got into the town of Owl Flats, hungry and tired, at a little after nine in the evening.

Acting on the advice of the lieutenant, he put up at the "Owl House," which had the best accommodations to be found in the place.

The proprietor was a genial sort of a fellow, named Harvey, and Wild made up his mind then and there that he would have no trouble in getting along with him.

CHAPTER V.

TWICE HELD UP AND A WINNER.

The next morning Young Wild West went over to the postoffice and showed his credentials to the postmaster, who

was more than pleased to learn that there was a prospect of the mail going through regularly.

"It has been very uncertain, ever since the route was first established," he said. "There is a lot of valuable mail that goes this way, too. The miners in this section and the mining districts to the north, are sending money to their homes in the East weekly, and the Government has decided to take hold of the matter and protect them. Already nearly all the post-offices have been made registered ones, but that does not insure the delivery of a letter or package; it simply proves that a letter or parcel has been received if the receipt comes back signed. It is going to cost the Government a big pile of money to get things running right out West, I can tell you!"

"I believe that," answered Wild. "Just as long as there are things to tempt the rascally men who seem so common in these parts, just so long will villainy thrive, unless, of course, the thieves are put to rout. I have undertaken to run the mail through on time for a month, and I will guarantee that if I am bothered by any of the mail robbers during that time, there will be a few less when my contract expires."

"I like to hear you talk that way, Mr. West. I see by this document you brought me that the first mail from here will leave to-morrow at ten o'clock."

"Yes; that will give me time to meet one of my partners at Yellow Dust, who will take the bags and go on through to the Fort. The other will be here before I start, and I will rest at Yellow Dust till he comes back, and then go on to the Fort. That is the way we will do it to begin with, but we want to fix it so one of us is at each of the three places continually, and arrange it so the hundred miles can be divided up equally during the week."

"Well, I suppose you can do that all right."

"Oh, yes; we can arrange it so that we all do the same amount of work."

"You can change off on the days that you have the short run between the Fort and Yellow Dust."

"Oh, we will have plenty chance to rest, unless the outlaws get after us so hot that they put us out of business."

"Well, I hope they don't do that," said the postmaster, speaking sincerely, for it was to his interest that the mail route should be safe.

Wild's horse had had the best of care, and the spirited animal was as frisky as a kitten when he went to saddle and bridle him a few minutes before ten.

It was time that Jim Dart showed up, and as Wild mounted and rode over to the post-office to get the mail bags, he began to grow just a trifle anxious.

But a minute or two later a cloud of dust showed in the distance, and then one of the miners in the waiting crowd that had gathered around the office to see the mail come in and go out, shouted:

"Here comes the Pony Express with the mail! Now, boys, we'll git some word from home!"

It was Jim Dart, sure enough.

He was riding hard, as though he was aware that he was late.

When he brought his foaming horse to a halt a cheer went up from the crowd.

Jim took off his hat and bowed, and then quickly dismounting, delivered the mail bags to the postmaster.

"So you got through all right, eh, Jim?" Wild observed a minute later, as he was ready to start.

"Yes. I had company all the way from Yellow Dust. That kept me from riding as hard as I wished to."

"Who came over with you?"

"Percy Pearsall."

"Where is he now?"

"He stopped about five miles below here. There were three prospectors there, whom he said were his friends. He said he would be here a little later."

There was no further time to talk now, as the postmaster came out with the mail.

The bags were swung over the sorrel's back, before and behind the saddle, and buckled to it.

Then, with a wave of his hand, Young Wild West galloped off on his Pony Express route.

"Jim had a little the worst of it, I guess," he thought, as he rode along. "We have got to arrange it so we only ride in the daylight, if it can be done. The night is the time for the robbers to attack us, anyway."

The morning was a fair one, and the breeze that came from the mountains was bracing.

Wild was expecting to meet Percy Pearsall, but when he had covered about seven miles he came to the conclusion that he must have taken another route.

But at that very moment he heard the clatter of hoofs from behind him, and turning, he beheld three villainous men pursuing him, with their rifles to their shoulders ready to fire.

"Ah!" he muttered, "so soon? On, Spitfire! If those fellows are after these mail bags they will never get them this trip."

The noble horse burst into a swift gallop, and just then another horseman showed up from another direction.

He was riding to head off the young Pony Express rider, and Wild saw at a glance that he was quite apt to do it, if his horse held out at its present gait.

But he resolved to give him a race.

Those behind him were not gaining a particle, and presently one of them fired a shot.

The bullet whistled harmlessly over Wild's head, but he did not make a move to return it just then.

He was keeping his eye on the man who was trying to head him off.

He was the only dangerous one in the lot.

Nearer and nearer they came together, and two more shots were fired at the brave boy from behind.

There would have to be something done in less than ten seconds, if the Prince of the Saddle meant to get through with the mail bags.

The fellow who had succeeded in heading him off now came dashing toward him with leveled rifle.

But before he could fire Young Wild West dropped him with a bullet from his revolver.

Then the sorrel made a spurt.

With his main foe out of the way, the boy now saw the way clear.

But as those behind kept on firing he turned in the saddle and laid another man low.

Then the other two dropped back and gave up the chase.

"Tally one for Young Wild West's Pony Express!" said Wild, with a grim smile. "There are two less of them to hold up the mail now."

When he had covered about four miles he brought his horse down to a slower pace, as he felt that there was no further danger from the villains who had attacked him.

When he was within ten miles of the town of Yellow Dust he suddenly came upon a band of Indians.

Though they were peaceful ones, they stopped him and asked for firewater.

"I have no firewater," Wild said to them. "I don't drink such stuff, and never carry it with me."

"Ugh!" grunted the chief, who was with them. "Pale-face boy tell heap big lie."

"See here, Redskin!" exclaimed Young Wild West. "It strikes me that you are looking for trouble. Now, you can see that I am carrying the mail for the Great Father at Washington, so you had better let me go on about my business. If you don't, the soldiers will be after you."

There was about a dozen of them, and they all seemed to be in the humor to do some mischief.

"If paleface boy no got firewater, we take bags," said the chief.

The Indians quickly surrounded Wild as this remark was made, and he saw that there was only one alternative, and that was to fight.

As quick as a flash he placed the bridle rein in his teeth, and whipped out his brace of revolvers.

"Stand back, you red fiends!" he cried. "Lay your hands on those mail bags and I will shoot!"

This abashed them somewhat, but they were not in the mood to give up so easily.

Wild decided to make a break for it.

He pressed his heels against the flanks of his horse, and then away dashed the spirited sorrel.

The Indians were scattered right and left by the move, but one of them recovered, and being more reckless than the others, began to shoot at the boy with his revolver.

Two bullets whistled past his head dangerously close, and then Wild thought it time to fire.

He sent two shots at them, dropping a couple of them from their horses wounded, but not dangerously.

That settled them, for instead of giving pursuit they realized that they had attacked an employee of the Government, and became frightened.

Wild rode into Yellow Dust ahead of time, and found Cheyenne Charlie waiting for him with his horse saddled.

The mail bags were quickly transferred, and then the scout rode away for the forty miles to Fort Unity.

So quick was the transfer made, that they barely had time to exchange greetings.

Wild turned his horse over to the care of the stableman, and then went into the hotel.

He was tired and hungry, for riding the way he had was no play.

A good wash, and he was ready to sit down to a hearty meal.

He took his time about eating, and when he had finished he went out into the barroom and purchased a cigar.

He had just lighted it, and was puffing away contentedly, when half a dozen soldiers from the Fort came in.

Among them was Surgeon Leon.

"Hello, Young Wild West!" the latter called out. "How are you making out with your Pony Express?"

"First rate," retorted Wild.

"Haven't been held up, have you?"

"Yes; only twice to-day."

"Lost the mail, did you?" and the surgeon's face was crossed by a look of satisfaction.

"Oh, no!" answered the Young Prince of the Saddle, not failing to notice the look. "I brought the mail through all right. You must have met my partner, if you came from the Fort, just now."

"We didn't come that way," and the man showed faint signs of being disappointed. "How did you make out with the ones who held you up? They were Indians, I suppose?"

"One lot was; the others were white men."

"And you got away from them all?"

"Yes. I shot two out of each crowd, though, to do it."

The surgeon gave a start.

"Is that so?" he questioned. "Who were the white men? Had you ever seen them before?"

"I never saw them before, to my knowledge."

"Well, I am glad you got away from them. I have been out scouring the country for my missing daughter. I begin to think that she was not kidnapped, after all, and that she ran away with some fellow. I wish you would help me find her."

"Well, if you really want me to help you, I will. Just give me the facts of the case."

At this juncture who should come in but old Gunnison, the hermit.

"Give me a pint of ther cheapest lickier you've got," he said, walking up to the bar.

"Hello, old man!" cried the surgeon, who had been drinking just enough to make him act a little reckless. "Come and have a drink with me. You, too, Young Wild West."

As these words were spoken the hermit turned and saw both Wild and the surgeon.

"Jest ther two I wanted to see!" he cried, stepping up. "Now, surgeon, an' Young Wild West, which of you was it that was in my cabin ther night afore last?"

The face of the surgeon turned red at this, but Wild only smiled.

"I was not inside your house, Mr. Gunnison," our hero replied. "I was shot by some one who was inside, though. Just ask the surgeon if he was there when the shot was fired."

At this the surgeon sprang toward Wild, and aimed a blow at his face with his fist.

"What do you mean by insinuating like that, Young Wild West? Take that!"

Again he struck at the boy, but missed him by a good way.

Then Wild caught hold of his nose, and gave it a twist.

"Keep cool, surgeon, or you will get in trouble," he said, mildly.

"You said I was in this man's house when you was shot at, and I say that you lie!"

"Keep cool, I tell you. I didn't say anything of the kind. I simply told him to ask you if you were there."

"That's insinuating it, and I demand satisfaction for it. You have either got to apologize or fight me with swords."

The hermit was just about to say something, but Wild motioned him to keep quiet.

Then one of the cavalrymen, with the surgeon, took it up for him, and began saying insulting things to Wild.

"I advise you to keep cool, too," our hero, said. "This is no quarrel of yours. I simply made a remark that was rather hasty, perhaps, but I won't take it back, for I believe the shoe fits the man to perfection. It is not my business to fight him with swords, as he is an old man, and probably not my equal in that line. I insinuated that he was in the cabin of Gunnison when I was shot at the night before last, and I believe it, too. I also think I know who was with him. But Mr. Gunnison seems to want to say something, so I will give him the chance."

"Well," spoke up the hermit, "whoever it was in my house, left this there when he went away," and he held a morocco spectacle case.

Wild took it from him, and saw that the initials on it were "J. L."

"Where did you get that?" cried the surgeon, excitedly, and he made a grab for the case.

CHAPTER VI.

EMMA MICHELS WORKS TO ESCAPE.

When Percy Pearsall parted company with Jim Dart, he did so simply for the purpose of going to his snug retreat, which was but a short distance away.

The prospectors Jim saw were no friends of Pearsall, neither did he know them.

But as the villain rode over with the boy, he must have some excuse to leave him before getting into the town.

The captain of the outlaws soon made his way to the cave, as Burt and Dodson had the day before.

When he got inside he found all his six men present.

They saluted him as he came in, and noticing that his wrist was bandaged, one of them said:

"What's ther matter, cap—been in a scrimmage?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Young Wild West, or one of his friends, did that."

"Is that a fact, cap?"

"Yes."

"An' what did you do to Young Wild West?"

"I came within an ace of dropping him from the saddle just before the bullet was fired that winged me."

"You missed him, then?"

"It was just my luck, I suppose. But we will get a chance at him in less than an hour from now. He is in Owl Flats, and will start out with the mail pretty soon."

This news surprised the outlaws not a little, but it was pleasing to them, for all that.

"So ther Pony Express route is started, then?" spoke up Dodson, the man who had succeeded in getting the best of the girl captive when she was about to escape from the cave.

"Yes; I rode over with the young fellow who brought the first mail over from the Fort. I met him at Yellow Dust and rode along with him for company."

"Ther dickens you say!" exclaimed Dodson.

"You didn't try to hold ther feller up, then?" questioned Burt.

"No. That would have been nonsense. There is more valuable mail that goes in the other direction. When Young Wild West comes along we will relieve him of the mail bags, and teach him that it is not always the thing to be too smart. He has declared that he will run the mail on time for a month, and has also signed a contract to that effect. He even guarantees to weed out the outlaws and reds who try to stop him from running his route. Now, it is for us to nip his big undertaking in the bud. He will leave as soon as the boy I rode over with reaches the post-office. I think four will be enough to take care of Young Wild West, and the mail bags, too."

"I reckon so."

The men seemed to be delighted at the prospect of holding up the Pony Express rider, and they began cleaning and examining their weapons to have them ready for use.

"How is the young lady?" questioned Pearsall, as he started for the tiny cascade that trickled in one corner of the big cave.

"She's about the same, I reckon," answered the man, whose Indian wife was in charge of her.

"She come mighty nigh gittin' away, cap," spoke up Dodson, who was anxious to let the captain know what he had done, and thus gain favor.

"Came near getting away!" echoed the villain. "What do you mean?"

Dodson then related the occurrence.

He did not cast any reflections on the way the rest had acted, but tried to impress it on the mind of the leader that he was something above the average man, when it came to thinking and acting quickly.

Pearsall commended the action of Dodson, and then when he had treated himself to a good wash and had combed his

hair, he headed for the apartment the girl was confined in.

Instead of taking the bar from the door and walking right in, he gave a gentle knock.

There was no answer from within, so he repeated it.

And then, there being no response, he walked in.

He found the girl standing in the center of the little apartment.

Her eyes were red from weeping, and the rest of her face was pale.

She showed every sign of worryment and suffering.

"Good morning, Miss Michels," he said, politely.

"Have you come to give me my liberty?" she asked, looking him in the eye, fearlessly.

"You can have your liberty any time you want it," Pearsall answered. "Become my bride, and we will hie away to Colorado and live in luxury. I own a good-paying silver mine there, and am able to give you everything you desire. Then, when that scoundrel of a step-father of yours walks into his own trap we will put the law on him, and you will get the fortune he has bargained to kill you to get hold of."

"You talk very nice, Mr. Pearsall," Emma Michels replied. "Were it not that you had bargained with my step-father to put me out of the way, and also threatened to do it, unless I became your wife, I might listen to what you say. But as it is, I detest you—I hate you! I will die before I become your wife! Now, then, do your worst!"

"Be it so, then," he retorted, hotly. "I will give you the balance of the week, though, to change your mind in. If you have not decided, by that time, to become my wife, you shall die. I have sworn it, and always keep my word."

"And you will find that I can die like a true woman!"

"Die you will, as surely as the sun rises and sets. It may be that you have given your heart to another. If so, do not hope to ever see him again. You are to be my wife, or no one's!"

"I will be the bride of death!" she answered, dramatically.

Pearsall stared hard at her for a moment, as though he thought she might be losing her reason.

Then without another word he left the room.

As soon as he was gone a gleam of satisfaction shone from the girl's eyes.

"Villain!" she exclaimed, under her breath. "I will cheat both you and my step-father. Before the week is up I will be out of here. All that is required of me now is to keep up my courage and work away at the hole I have started to dig."

As she expressed herself thus she turned to some drapery at the side of the apartment, and pulling it aside, disclosed an opening between two rocks.

While outside in the main cave she had noticed that the place she had been confined in was on the side of the cave that the light came through.

That made her think that she might possibly dig her way out, though she did not stop to think that the cave might be lined with solid rock.

Instead of being disheartened at being seized and placed

back in the apartment, she became imbued with a stronger desire to escape than ever.

She had found a soft spot between the two rocks, and with the table knife, that had been left in the place by the squaw, she dug into it.

The heavy draperies would conceal her work when any one came in, so a great hope arose in her breast.

Once out of the cave the brave girl would make for the nearest town or settlement, and ask protection.

Then she would tell her story, and the robber band might be broken up.

Also, her step-father would be punished for bargaining to have her put out of the way.

There was a dashing young soldier at the Fort, who had often smiled upon Emma, and she was more than interested in him.

Though but slightly acquainted with him, she thought more about him since she had been in captivity than any other human being.

The soldier's name was David Lansing, and though but a private, had hopes of winning the affections of the surgeon's step-daughter.

Emma was thinking of the dashing young cavalryman as she dug into the yielding dirt, and rapidly enlarged the opening.

She knew he was stationed at Owl Flats for the present, and as she had been to that town once, she judged the distance, and came to the conclusion that she was not so very far from it now.

It had been dark when she was taken into the cave, but she knew the way to the road for all that.

Not being one of the sort who are given to fainting at the first sign of danger, Emma Michels stood some show of escaping from the cave of the robbers.

For two days she spent her time in digging her way to freedom, eating the meals that were brought to her to keep up her strength.

On the night following she suddenly found herself looking out in a patch of moonlight!

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE HOTEL IN YELLOW DUST.

"Ah!" exclaimed Young Wild West, as the surgeon made a grab for the spectacle case. "So it is yours, is it?"

"Yes; it is mine," was the reply. "Hand it over, or I will run you through with my sword!"

Instead of complying with the demand, Wild thrust the case in his pocket.

As he did, this the angered doctor drew his sword and made a vicious attempt to run the boy through the body.

But the young Prince of the Saddle was altogether too active to allow anything like that to happen.

He stepped nimbly aside, and seizing the hilt of the sword that hung to the belt of the nearest cavalryman, he drew it, and prepared to defend himself.

And, strange as it may seem, the cavalryman did not try to keep him from taking the weapon.

He simply stepped back out of the way, while the fellow who had taken the part of the surgeon looked angrily at him.

"What did you allow the boy to take your sword for, Lansing?" he cried.

"I believe in fair play," was the calm rejoinder.

"You do, eh? Well, take that, then!"

The fellow had been drinking, and losing control of himself, he dealt the young man a blow with the flat of his sword that caused him to stagger.

Then the two grappled.

Meanwhile, Young Wild West was at it in earnest with the surgeon.

The latter was an excellent swordsman, and Wild had never fought with such a weapon before.

But that made little difference to the boy; he had the strength and courage, and that meant a whole lot.

In spite of the fact that he was a novice he soon began to force his elderly foe backward.

Our hero was watching everything that was going on in the room. He saw that the rest of the cavalrymen had pitched upon the man he had seized the sword from, and were administering a sound beating to him.

Wild resolved to help the fellow.

So, with a quick move he disarmed the surgeon, cutting his hand pretty badly as he did so.

Then he rushed at the cowards who were so intent upon beating one of their number.

Spat! Spat! Spat!

His clenched fists began to land upon the faces of the cavalrymen.

One fell sprawling on his back, and two more went staggering across the room.

"Fair play, you cowards!" cried Young Wild West, in a ringing tone.

At this the young man called Lansing got a show, and he went at them hot and heavy.

Wild kept right at his side, and in less than two minutes all of them were lying or sitting on the floor of the bar-room, the surgeon included.

One of them drew a pistol, and was going to shoot at Wild, but the boy caught him in time, and kicked the weapon from his hand.

"Don't make a mistake now, and go to shooting," he said. "If you do, I will surely drop you. You are the worst set of cowards I ever met, and it shall be my duty to report you when I ride over to the Fort."

This had a wonderful effect on them all.

"Let it drop, won't you?" said one. "We was drunk, an' didn't know what we was doin'."

"I hope you will reconsider your determination, Young Wild West," remarked the surgeon, in a very humble tone. "I was the cause of all the trouble, I suppose, and I am willing to apologize for anything I did or said."

"An apology is not needed from you, sir," retorted Wild.

"For the sake of these fellows, who now seem to realize that they have made fools of themselves, I won't report the matter. But, remember, it is not for your sake. You were in the cabin when the shot was fired at me, and you were also close by the fellow who got shot in the wrist when my partner fired at the windows. I was not positive of this at first, but I am now."

"Well, I shall prove to you that I was at my quarters in the barracks at the time," said the surgeon, with a very white face. "You are very hot-headed, Young Wild West, and you are badly mistaken in this."

"Let it drop at that for the present, then," retorted Wild, with a frown. "Surgeon, I have promised to help find your daughter for you, and I will keep my word. In the meantime, you had better be cautious how you act. I am here to run the mail through on time, and all the outlaws and bad Indians, together with the traitors they have to help them, will not stop me. I always make it a point to do a thing when I once undertake it."

Wild now handed the sword back to the man he had taken it from.

The cavalryman was looking at him admiringly when he did so, and he bowed his thanks for the assistance rendered him.

"Now, can't we all have a drink, and let this matter drop?" asked the surgeon.

"Yes," answered Young Wild West. "Here is your case," and he handed it over.

"Thank you."

At this the old hermit, who had been standing in a corner of the room during all the excitement, stepped forward.

He was just about to address Surgeon Leon, when Wild caught his eye.

The glance he gave him meant for him to be silent, and he did so.

The old fellow had learned to put a great deal of faith in Wild.

Then the surgeon began spending his money lavishly, and the affair soon blew over, as far as the majority of them were concerned, anyway.

A little later Wild got a chance to talk in private to the man who had befriended him by allowing him to take his sword from its scabbard.

He learned that his name was David Lansing, and that he was very much interested in the disappearance of the step-daughter of the surgeon.

"I have an idea where she is," he said. "There is a man named Percy Pearsall, who lives over in Owl Flats somewhere. He is in love with her, I am sure, for I heard the surgeon say so once. I have an idea that Pearsall is a scoundrel, and that he has carried Emma Michels off, with the assistance of her father."

"And I have that same idea," replied our hero.

"I have been searching for the girl for two or three days, off and on, and to-day, while riding this way from Owl Flats, I met these fellows from the Fort, who declared that they were looking for her, also. I thought that they

acted as though they did not expect to find her, though, especially her step-father."

"Step-fathers are liable to be mean sometimes."

"Yes; especially when they would be benefited if the child was out of the way."

"And that is the way it is in this case?"

"Yes; I believe so."

"Well, Lansing, I will help you find her. I will do all I can when I ride back to Owl Flats. You are stationed there, are you not?"

"Yes; for the present."

"Well, be on the lookout for me the next time I come in with the mail."

"I will."

A few minutes later Lansing joined the detachment who were doing patrol duty on the Pony Express route, and rode on back toward Owl Flats.

The surgeon and the others from the Fort remained at the hotel drinking and carousing until late that night.

Young Wild West excused himself, and went to his room over an hour before they left.

It must have been considerably after midnight when Wild was awakened by hearing a noise in his room.

When he awoke he did not make a sound, but simply listened.

It was dark in the room, and he could see nothing.

But the next instant he heard a soft footfall.

His practiced ear told him just where the person who had entered his room by some means, was, and his hand reached for his belt that was on a chair beside the bed.

The next instant he had a revolver in his hand.

Just then a ray of light from a bull's-eye lantern flashed full upon him.

In the center of the apartment stood a masked man holding the lantern with one hand, and gripping a long-bladed knife with the other.

"Well, my friend, what can I do for you?" asked Young Wild West, calmly.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD LEARNS CONSIDERABLE.

The masked man uttered an oath when he saw the revolver staring him in the face and heard the words of Young Wild West.

"Drop that knife!" commanded the young Pony Express rider, in a tone that was full of meaning.

Down went the weapon to the floor with a ring.

Then something happened that Wild was not expecting.

The door of the room was wide open, and as quick as a flash the masked villain turned and darted from the scene.

Wild did not fire.

He scrambled out of bed, hastily donned part of his clothing, and started in pursuit.

But when he got outside his masked visitor was nowhere to be seen.

By this time the landlord and some of the other inmates of the hotel were up.

They had been aroused by the noise the masked man made in leaving the house in such a hurry.

Thinking he might be mistaken for a burglar, Wild promptly called out to the landlord, saying:

"It is me—Young Wild West. I woke and found a masked man in my room. He got away before I could catch him."

"A masked man!" echoed the proprietor, as he came out, revolver in hand. "Well, by jove! That beats me. What could he want in your room, I wonder?"

"He either wanted to kill or rob me, I suppose. I—hello! here is the mask he wore, as sure as I live!"

The young Prince of the Saddle stooped and picked up the article in question, and held it up in his hands.

One of the hotel employees now came forward with a lighted lamp, and then all hands looked at the mask curiously.

It was made of the crown of a black felt hat, and had been tied with a string, which had broken in the flight of the man who had worn it, and thus it had dropped to the ground.

The eye-holes in the piece of felt were perfectly round, and as our hero looked at them carefully he came to the conclusion that they had been cut by a wad cutter for a shot-gun.

"The pieces cut out would just fit a ten-bore gun," he said to the landlord. "You haven't such a thing as a wad-cutter in the house, have you?"

"No," and the man shook his head. "We have two or three guns, but no wad-cutter."

"Well, the fellow must have been slightly familiar with the hotel, or he could not have got in and out so quickly and neatly. Have you any other guests besides these who are here?"

"No other one but ther surgeon from ther Fort. He got so drunk that we had to put him to bed. He was in a regular stupor, an' ther chances are that he ain't heard a word of what's goin' on."

"I wish you would go up and see if he is in his room."

"Well, if you think it is necessary, I'll do that. I hope you don't think ther surgeon was ther one who wanted to rob you?"

"No. I don't think he would want to rob me. We had a quarrel, though, you know."

"Yes; but I thought that got all smoothed over?"

"It was, apparently."

"I'll take you to ther room of the surgeon, so you kin see for yourself if he is there."

"All right."

Axter led the way to the room the surgeon had been carried to after he became so drunk he could not help himself.

The door was ajar, and when Wild saw this he gave a satisfied nod.

He felt certain that it was Leon who had been in his

room the moment he heard that he had roomed at the hotel that night.

The landlord pushed open the door and held the lantern inside.

One glance was sufficient to show that the room was empty, as far as a human being was concerned.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Young Wild West. "Surgeon Leon was the man. I am glad to know this, for I will now know how to treat him the next time I meet him."

"Well, observed Axter, scratching his head in a puzzled way. "I didn't think ther surgeon was that kind of a man; but it must have been him. Do you s'pose he wanted to kill you?"

"Yes. I have such an idea. Hereafter I will be on the lookout for him.

As Surgeon Leon spent considerable money with him, and had always shown himself a fine sort of a fellow, Axter had little to say about the occurrence.

But he had seen and heard enough of Young Wild West to make him have a great respect for him, and if it came to the test he was bound to stick to him.

"Well, I guess I will go back and finish my sleep," said Wild, in his usual cool way. "I feel pretty sure that my masked visitor won't show up again to-night. Good night, all! I am sorry this thing happened to disturb you from your slumbers."

They all bade him good night, and then the dashing young Pony Express rider went back to his room, closing and locking the door.

It had been locked before, but the villain must have thrust a pair of pliers through the key-hole and turned the key, in order to get in.

The incident was soon forgotten by Wild, and it was not long before he was sleeping as peacefully as though nothing had occurred to disturb him.

But when he got up the next morning and went to breakfast, what was his surprise to find Surgeon Leon seated at the table.

"Good morning, Mr. West," he said affably. "I am all at sea this morning. I woke up about half an hour ago and found myself lying in the hallway at the other end of the house. The whiskey I drank last night must have made me crawl around in my sleep."

"It must have had a wonderful effect on you, surgeon," replied Wild. "It even made you put on a mask and come into my room. What did you do with the knife you had, and how did you manage to turn the key in the lock, when it was on the inside?"

Leon looked at him in surprise.

But it was not genuine, though he was considerable of an actor.

"You surely don't mean what you say, Young Wild West?" he questioned.

"Let it drop, surgeon. If you are given to going about in your sleep and trying to stab people in bed, you are not responsible for it. Let it drop."

"I assure you that what you say is a mystery to me," and

the man put on a look of anxious surprise, that was nearly as good as the real thing.

"Let it drop, then," our hero answered, rather curtly.

Leon ate but very little, which showed that his debauch of the night before was telling heavily upon him.

He forced a cup of coffee down and then got up from the table.

A few minutes later his horse was brought to him, and mounting, he rode away in the direction of the Fort.

A couple of minutes later Wild went out to the stable, and ordering his horse to be saddled, got ready to follow on the track of the man.

He was bent on having it out with the surgeon, if possible.

When he left the hotel he did not ride very fast, thinking that the fellow had proceeded leisurely.

But when he had covered ten miles, and found that he was nowhere in sight yet, he struck out at a faster pace.

Five miles further on he suddenly came in sight of two horsemen.

He quickly reined in Spitfire, and rode beneath a tree at the side of the road.

He recognized the two horsemen at a glance.

One was Surgeon Leon, and the other was Gunnison, the hermit.

Wild watched them for a few minutes, and presently he saw the surgeon give the old man something, and then ride on.

Waiting till he was out of sight our hero rode out of the cover of the trees, and rode out to meet Gunnison, who was now riding in that direction.

"Hello, Young Wild West!" the old fellow called out. "You are jest ther one I want to see."

"Good morning, Mr. Gunnison. What do you want to see me about?"

"I jest met Surgeon Leon, an' had quite a talk with him. He told me not to say anything more about any one bein' in my cabin, an' he give me fifty dollars after I said I wouldn't."

"Ah!"

"I took ther money, 'cause when I told him I wouldn't say any more about it, I meant that I wouldn't say anything to him, you know."

"I see."

"Fifty dollars is a whole lot of money, you know."

"Yes," answered Wild, realizing how miserly the old man was.

"I found out what they was doin' in my cabin, I guess."

"Yes? Well, what were they doing there?"

"Well, ther first time they was there they had the surgeon's step-darter there. She was caught in ther day time by ther ones who took her away, you know, an' they kept her in my place till it was dark. I happened to be away at Yaller Dust, where I stay more'n half my time. You see, I'm gettin' a little tired of ther way I've been livin' so long, an' I feel sorter like mixin' up with people a little."

"Yes; I should think you would feel that way. How about the next time they were in there?"

"Well, ther surgeon says that him an' a friend was so drunk ther other night that they couldn't git back to ther Fort, an' they thought they'd better put up at my cabin. They thought it was robbers after 'em when you fellers come along, an' that is why they shot at you."

"Oh!"

"That is what he said they thought, you know."

"Yes; he would say that, naturally."

"But I think he means to kill you, if he kin. He didn't say so right out an' out, but he sorter talked that way."

"See here, Mr. Gunnison, have you told me all you know about this case?"

"Every word of what I know, Mr. West."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir; I'm sartin of it. I wouldn't lie to you—not if I was paid for it."

"Well, if you are telling me all you know, so much the better for you. Some one is going to get into no end of trouble pretty soon, and I would not want to see it be you."

"Well, I've told you all I know about ther case; now you tell me what to do."

"Just go right on as you are, and try and find out where the surgeon's step-daughter was taken to. Give him the privilege of using your cabin whenever he cares to, too."

"Yes, sir."

"And if you want to keep straight with the people at the Fort, just tell me everything you find out."

"I'll do that, Young Wild West."

"Very well. Now, let us ride back to Yellow Dust. That is quite a horse you have there."

"Oh! he ain't much good. I bought him of Sol Sampson, in Yaller Dust. He kinder took pity on me an' sold him cheap."

Young Wild West talked with the man all the way back, but he could glean nothing further from him.

He concluded that he had been telling nothing but the truth; but he realized that his greed for gold might make him a different sort of a man in time.

Some men will do almost anything for money.

Wild thought he had better keep an eye on the hermit, for it was possible that he might take it in his head to go back on him.

When they reached the Axter House, in Yellow Dust, he treated the old fellow, and let the subject drop.

Our hero took things easy until it was time for Cheyenne Charlie to arrive at Yellow Dust with the mail.

Then he saddled Spitfire and got ready for the jaunt to Owl Flats.

He would make the run from the two places for that week, and the next they would change off.

Charlie came through right on the minute.

There had nothing occurred to interfere with him on the way.

"Any news?" asked our hero, as he took the bags and placed them on his horse.

"Nothin', much; only there is a reward offered for ther girl what's missin' from ther Fort," was the reply.

"Well, I will hunt for her this trip. I have an idea that she might be somewhere around Owl Flats. Say!" and Wild lowered his voice to a whisper. "Jest keep an eye on Surgeon Leon. He tried to put a finish to me last night."

"Is that so?" asked the scout, in surprise. "Well, you kin jest bet I'll keep an eye on him!"

That was all they had a chance to say.

In order to make connections Wild must ride on.

He had changed the time of leaving so he would reach Owl Flats just about dusk.

Then Jim Dart would start out the first thing in the morning.

That would give Charlie a chance to take the mail and get it to the Fort in the early part of the evening.

Wild rode along at a sharp pace, the miles rapidly rolling up.

He was keeping a sharp watch ahead of him, for he thought the Indians might be waiting for him again.

But he cared not so much for them as he did the whites he had met near the end of the route.

When about half way to Owl Flats he met the patrol.

Lansing, the young fellow who was so much interested in the missing girl, was with them.

"I am going to ride into Owl Flats with you, Mr. West," he said. "That is why I rode out with the six men on duty."

"All right," was the reply. "Have you any suspicions of where the girl might be?"

"No; not exactly. But I think there is a gang of men who have a hiding place somewhere pretty close to the town of Owl Flats."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And I have reason to believe that Percy Pearsall hangs out there about half the time. Last night Pearsall was in town, drinking and gambling until quite late. When he left the saloon I followed him. He disappeared all of a sudden, about ten miles this side of the town. I hunted for over an hour, but could find no traces of him."

"By Jove!" said Wild. "I believe you are right when you say you think there is some sort of a hiding place for a gang around there, then. I'll help you hunt for the place to-night!"

CHAPTER IX.

EMMA MICHELS ESCAPES.

Young Wild West and Lansing reached Owl Flats without mishap.

Our hero noticed that the bodies of the two men he had shot when he came over, had been taken away.

From what Lansing had told him, he was now of the opinion that Percy Pearsall was in league with the mail robbers, and he resolved to pay a visit to the spot where he had disappeared, that very night.

Jim Dart had picked up considerable during his short stay in the town, too.

By pumping the store-keeper, and a bartender, he had learned that there were two men, whose names were Burt and Dodson, that were supposed to be working a claim some eight or ten miles out of town, near the trail to Yellow Dust, but that no one had ever seen them doing much work.

When he once got this to work on, he began asking questions, concerning the two men, of the different miners he came across.

Invariably he got the same reply.

No one knew much about the men.

And Percy Pearsall was more of a mysterious character than either of them.

When he told Wild all he had learned, the two put their heads together, and decided to hunt up these three men in particular.

Burt and Dodson had been to town that afternoon, and they had bought a supply of stores from the grocery.

It was a little before nine in the evening when Wild, Jim and Lansing rode out of the town.

They headed straight for the ridge at the right of the river, and did not halt until they were within a couple of hundred yards of the place where Lansing declared Percy Pearsall had disappeared, when he had followed him.

They found a secluded spot, and tied their horses. Then they began to hunt about the vicinity.

The robbers' retreat was a very snug one, and unless a person knew exactly how to reach it nothing but an accident would lead him to it.

Accidents sometimes happen.

It chanced that Wild led his two companions into a ravine that ran almost parallel with the trail, after they had worked their way over the top of the ridge.

It was while they were stealthily making their way through the ravine that Wild suddenly heard a slight noise, almost at his side.

Instantly he was all attention.

He placed his fingers to his lips to warn his companions to remain perfectly quiet.

It was a sort of peculiar scratching noise that he heard, and as he crouched there in a listening attitude, some loosened dirt came tumbling down upon his shoulders.

Some of it dropped on Jim and Lansing at the same time.

Then all three realized that they were on the eve of a discovery of some kind.

Young Wild West waited a couple of seconds, and then arose to a standing position.

Just then something happened that gave him a big surprise.

There was a muffled scream, followed by a crashing of loosened earth, and then a rather heavy body fell upon him, knocking him in a confused heap to the ground.

"My goodness!" cried the voice of a female. "Have I

fallen in the hands of the very ones I was trying so hard to escape from, or is it friends I have found?"

"Friends!" replied Lansing, quickly. "Heavens! It is Miss Michels!"

At this Wild sprang to his feet.

He was just in time to see the young cavalryman catch the fainting form of a girl, and keep her from falling.

"Mr. West," said Lansing, tremulously; "we have found the surgeon's step-daughter!"

"What?" gasped Wild and Jim, in unison.

"It is Emma Michels, just as sure as the stars are shining above our heads, or that the moon is riding the sky, yonder!"

There was just a tinge of the romantic in the words and actions of the cavalryman, which the two boys did not fail to note, in spite of the remarkable occurrence.

But Young Wild West was not one to wonder very long, no matter what strange thing happened.

"Jim," said he, in a whisper, "help Lansing to get the girl to the horses. Bring her to from her faint as soon as possible, and then start them off for the town."

"Yes," answered Dart. "And what then?"

"You come back here. We must find out what sort of a place it was she came from."

That was enough for Jim.

The next minute the pair of them were bearing the girl away from the spot with noiseless tread.

They carried her all the way to the spot where they had left the horses, and then, as she had not recovered from her swoon yet, they took her to the bank of the river.

By the aid of a water-soaked handkerchief they soon brought her to.

"Where am I?" cried the frightened girl, looking wildly around.

"With friends, Miss Michels," replied Lansing. "We were looking for you, and very strangely you fell right among us. Are you injured?"

"Oh, no," was the reply. "I am so glad you came, Mr. Lansing. Please take me away from here as soon as possible."

"I will do that soon enough. But first are you able to tell us where you came from when you dropped among us so suddenly?"

"Yes," she answered. "I am all right, now. Percy Pearsall has had me confined in a cave for several days, and to-night I managed to finish digging a hole through the end of the place I was kept in, and when I pushed my head and shoulders through to find where I was coming out, the ground gave way and I fell down. I remember of seeing your face, Mr. Lansing, and of hearing your voice, then I fainted, from joy, I guess. I will tell you all I know about the place."

She did so in a very few words, winding up by saying:

"There were six men under the command of Percy Pearsall when I was brought here, but learned from the squaw who attended to my wants, that there are only four now.

Two of them were shot by a Pony Express rider, whom they call Young Wild West."

"Exactly," said Jim Dart. "It was Young Wild West who broke your fall when you fell from the hole in the cave, miss. He is there waiting for me now, so you had better go on with Mr. Lansing. He will take you to the headquarters of the troopers, where you will be perfectly safe."

"My—my father is not there, is he?" she asked hesitatingly.

"No," spoke up Lansing. "Your step-father is not there. He is supposed to be at Fort Unity."

"I am glad of that. It was he who bargained with Percy Pearsall to take me away and put me to death."

"Ah! I thought so."

"The fiend!" added Jim.

"Pearsall changed his mind about killing me after he got me to his hiding place," went on the girl. "He decided to betray the surgeon and force me to marry him."

"He did, eh?" cried the cavalryman, fiercely. "Well, I guess he will never live to do that, Miss Michels."

"I would die before I would become his wife!"

Emma Michels shuddered as she said this, and involuntarily drew closer to Lansing.

The feelings the young couple had held toward each other had ripened into love.

Jim noticed that they appeared as though they had been lovers, but he said nothing.

"Lansing," he remarked, a few moments later, "you can carry Miss Michels over to Owl Flats on your horse, can't you?"

"Oh, yes," was the reply.

"Well, start at once, then. I want to go back to Wild. He has some idea in his head, I guess, and I want to help him carry it out."

"All right. We will be off at once."

Dart assisted to get the girl in position on the horse's back, and then the young couple rode off.

Jim then cautiously retraced his steps to the ravine where he had left Wild.

He had no difficulty in finding the entrance to the ravine, since he had marked the spot well in his mind.

He did not neglect the woodcraft he always employed, though, and approached the place where he had left the young Prince of the Saddle as carefully as though he knew there were men watching to get a shot at him. But when he reached the identical place where the girl had tumbled from the opening in the cave, Wild was not there!

CHAPTER X.

WILD AND JIM DO SOME GREAT WORK.

Dart and Lansing had scarcely disappeared from view with the unconscious girl, when Young Wild West suddenly heard a crackling sound right near him.

Revolver in hand, he turned in the direction the sound came from, and then a big, burly form pounced upon him from behind.

The weapon was wrenched from his grasp and a hand was placed over his mouth before he knew what had happened.

He made a struggle to free himself, but it was in vain, for another man came to the assistance of the first one almost immediately, and then Wild was forced to the ground.

In a very short space of time he was bound and gagged, and then, without so much as a word, his captors picked him up bodily and bore him away.

But, though he was bound and gagged, the boy could see, by aid of the bright moonlight, that he was being carried out of the ravine to the trail.

"I am in for it once more," he thought, as all his coolness returned to him. "But if they don't kill me right off, I will fool them yet. I have been in such a fix before."

That was a peculiar way to look at it, one might think, but Young Wild West was one of the sort who always look on the bright side of things, no matter how dark and gloomy they appear.

The men who had so neatly captured him were no others than Dadson and Burt, the two who had arrived at the headquarters in time to prevent the escape of Emma Michels when she made the first attempt.

They had just left the retreat to ride over to Owl Flats, when they heard voices in the ravine, which was right close to the entrance of the secret cave.

They quickly dismounted and tied their horses, and then they sneaked toward the ravine from the side of the hill in the direction they had heard the sounds.

It so happened that they did not get to the spot until after Jim and the cavalryman had left the girl.

But they could see the figure of Young Wild West standing there in the moonlight, and they resolved to capture him and take him before the captain.

It is just possible that if they had known he was Young Wild West they would have shot him down. But they did not, nor did they when they had succeeded in making a prisoner of him.

The two outlaws did not look for the others they had heard talking; they hurried to get their prisoner into the cave.

And they did this in short order, the man on guard being very much astonished when our hero was lugged inside in a helpless condition.

"A spy, I reckon," observed Burt. "We caught him in their ravine out there."

"Take him in an' let ther captain see him," was the reply. "Maybe he knows him."

The captive was then quickly carried through the passage into the cave, and when the light from the hanging oil lamp struck Wild's eyes he blinked like an owl.

"Aha!" exclaimed a voice that our hero knew only too well. "What have we here?"

"A feller we caught sneakin' around close by, cap," was the retort from Dadson.

"A spy, eh? Well, I guess we will take care of him,

then. We will show him that he— What! By the living jingo! it is Young Wild West!"

At this the other man in the cave and the squaws came hurriedly forward.

"It is Young Wild West, sure enough," resumed Percy Pearsall, for it was he who had spoken. "Well, I consider this is great luck!"

"Well, we didn't know it was him when we pounced on him," said Burt. "Now I guess we kin git square on him for layin' two of us low."

"Yes, I rather think we will square accounts with him," remarked Pearsall. "Young Wild West's Pony Express will surely come to an abrupt ending, and the ending will take place this very night. It is too bad for one to die so young, but he is altogether too soon for his time. The good die young, so they say, and that is the way it will be in this case."

As Wild heard this remark he realized that the villains surely meant to kill him.

But he did not show a sign of being frightened.

"Shall we take the gag out of his mouth, cap?" asked Burt.

"Yes; if he goes to yelling for help I'll shoot him right now. Was he alone out there?"

"Well, we heard someone talkin', but when we got to ther spot he was ther only one there."

"What! And you didn't look for any one else? You are fools, the pair of you! Heard someone talking, did you? You don't suppose Young Wild West is one of the sort who goes around talking to himself, do you? Go out and look to see if there is any one else about. If you see any one shoot them dead the instant you can cover them. Why, it might be that he had a dozen men with him, and that we will be raided at any minute."

Burt and Dadson slunk off immediately.

"Take the gag from his mouth," continued the villain, addressing the other outlaw.

He leveled his revolver at the captive as he spoke.

"How are you, Mr. Pearsall?" observed Young Wild West, coolly, the moment he had the use of his tongue. "This is quite a joke you are playing on me. It reminds me of the stories I have read of how they haze the students at different colleges."

"It does, eh? Well, I am glad you take it as a joke. But let me tell you, Young Wild West, you have just fifteen minutes to live, so make your peace with your Maker, and be quick about it!"

"That's all right, Pearsall. You can't fool me. Some people might be frightened at this, but I am not one of that kind. I have seen too many practical jokes played."

The outlaw captain looked at the boy quizzically.

"Do you really think I am fooling?" he asked.

"Certainly I do. I know you would not kill me."

"Well, just stop thinking that way, then, for as soon as the two who brought you here come back you are going to die."

"You are not getting crazy, are you?" asked our hero, affecting surprise.

"Oh, no!"

"Just untie me, then.

"You will never be untied alive."

"Pshaw! Untie me, Pearsall. You are carrying the joke a little too far now."

The robber captain looked at the boy keenly.

There was nothing about the face of Wild to indicate anything else than that he was fearless and just the least bit angry.

But he knew well enough that he was in a tight place.

He had not the least idea but that Pearsall would kill him.

He was just the sort of man to do that.

But Young Wild West meant to save himself, if there was any way possible to do it.

If acting coolly would delay things any, he was the one to do it.

"Mr. Pearsall," said the boy, a moment later, "I feel that you are playing a joke on me, but if it should be that you are not, and that you really mean to do what you say, you will not live two hours. I am something of a seer, and I make that prediction with great sincerity."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the villain, though Wild noticed that the laugh was forced.

"You had better untie me at once," resumed Wild. "I came around this part of the country to-night in search of the step-daughter of Surgeon Leon. I promised him that I would do all I could to find her, and I did the first thing after I got here."

"You mean you think you have found her," spoke up Pearsall, sneeringly.

"No thinking about it. I have found her, and she is now well on her way to Owl Flats. I have a way of doing things, you know, that never fails."

The outlaw captain looked at him aghast.

"Do you mean to say that you found Emma Michels, and that she is now on her way to Owl Flats?" he asked.

"That is just what I do mean. I wonder how it was that you did not find her. She was so close to you, too."

Young Wild West had been working his wrists for the past minute, and he found that he could slip his bonds.

He was preparing for a desperate move.

There were but three men in the place, including the guard, and six squaws.

If he could get his hands free and grab a revolver from the belt of Percy Pearsall, he would willingly take his chances with the whole lot of them.

Pearsall appeared to be puzzled and worried at the same time.

"Stand here by him," he said to one of the men. "There is no danger of his running away, I guess, but you had better keep a sharp eye on him, for all that. I am going to see if what he said about the girl is true."

As Pearsall moved toward a corner of the cave our hero shifted his feet so he could brace himself.

Though his captors had wound a rope about the upper part of his body, pinioning his arms, they had not done anything to his lower extremities.

Wild had now worked the rope loose so he could free his hands the moment he desired to do it.

The man who stepped up to him for the purpose of keeping an eye on him was a half breed.

The belt he wore fairly bristled with weapons, giving him a formidable appearance.

He was enough to frighten a timid person, but Young Wild West merely smiled at him when he came up close to him.

As the robber captain unfastened the door to go to the apartment where he had left the girl captive, Wild suddenly lowered his head and butted the half breed full in the stomach.

Then he jerked his hands free and grabbed a pair of revolvers from the belt of the man as he was in the act of settling to the ground with the wind completely knocked out of him from the force of the blow.

The guard could not see what had been done, so the only ones who did see it were the squaws.

They at once set up a howl of alarm, and turning as quick as a wink, Pearsall saw what had happened.

He drew his revolver and began firing at our hero, who had now stepped behind a jutting point of rock at the side of the cave.

The captain had fired just three shots when the door he had unfastened flew open and the active figure of a boy sprang out, a revolver in either hand.

It was Jim Dart.

"Hands up!" he cried. "Hands up, Pearsall, or down you go!"

"That's it, Jim!" called out Young Wild West, who was now right in his element. "If he makes another move to show fight, drop him!"

Jim had come back to the spot where he had left Wild, and finding him gone, he had acted on the first thought that came to him.

This happened to be for him to climb up the side of the ravine and enter the hole the girl had emerged from.

It struck him that Wild had gone in the place that way, and that being the case, he would follow.

And Jim had got there just in time to hear someone fooling with the door.

He held his revolver ready for instant use and waited.

The next instant two reports rang out in quick succession from the other side of the door.

Then Dart acted, and very quickly, at that.

He flung open the door and came upon Percy Pearsall in the act of shooting his chum.

Jim's first impression was to shoot the scoundrel in the back, but he did not.

He simply called out to him to hold his hands up, for his quick eye told him that Wild was really the master of the situation.

But just then something happened that Jim had not figured on.

Swiftly approaching footsteps were heard, and then the guard and the two men who had been sent out by the captain came rushing in.

They comprehended the situation at a glance, it seemed, for they promptly began firing.

And when they began to fire Young Wild West and Jim Dart set in to return the compliment.

Wild dropped the guard as he was in the act of discharging his revolver for the third time, and Jim put a bullet in the left shoulder of the fellow called Dadson.

The shooting made considerable smoke in the low-ceilinged cave, and before he could be stopped Percy Pearsall darted into the cave Jim had emerged from so suddenly.

Jim quickly worked his way over to Wild.

The squaws were uttering frightened howls and imprecations in their own tongue, and all was confusion.

Burt immediately ran out of the cave when he saw the guard and Dadson fall.

He did not like to be around when such shooting was going on.

The only man left in the place now was the half breed, and he sat upon the floor, too frightened to get up and run.

"See here," said Wild, addressing him; "just you tell the squaws to shut up and drop their weapons, and get in a bunch in that corner over there. If they don't, and persist in shooting at us, we will surely treat them the same as if they were men."

The man promptly called out in the Indian tongue to the squaws, and the moment they understood him they obeyed.

"Now, then, you stand right where you are, and don't you dare to move for the next five minutes. If you do you will be apt to go under the same as the other two fellows did just now!"

As our hero said this he started for the door the captain had gone through.

Jim followed him.

The half breed, being without a shooter, since Wild had taken them from him, remained standing with his hands above his head; the squaws huddled together in a corner as though they expected every minute to be their last on earth.

Our two daring friends quickly went into the apartment the girl captive had been confined in.

The light that had been allowed the girl was still there, which showed that Pearsall had not taken the time to extinguish it in his hasty flight.

The villain must have discovered the way to get out at the start, for the draperies were torn aside and the opening made by the girl was plainly visible.

Wild unhesitatingly pushed his head through and looked out.

In the moonlight he could see the bottom of the ravine about ten feet below very plainly.

There was nothing living there.

Drawing in his head, he thrust his feet through, and then allowed himself to slide down.

"All right!" he called out to Jim, as he struck the ground and recovered his balance.

Then Jim quickly followed.

Once in the ravine, they hurriedly made their way to the trail.

They had just reached the mouth of the ravine when the sounds of receding hoofs came to their ears.

That there was more than one man riding away was plainly evident by the sounds.

"The scoundrels have got their horses somehow, and they are now making their escape. Let us get our horses and pursue them!" cried Wild.

"Hurry, then!" answered Jim.

They hastily made their way to the spot where their horses were hidden.

They had not been disturbed, and quickly untying them, they mounted.

Out upon the trail they dashed, and turning, followed the escaping villains, who had chosen to go in the direction of Owl Flats.

But though they rode at a fast gait it was a hopeless race.

The outlaws had got too good a start.

"How many were there of them, do you think?" Jim asked, as they came to a brief halt and listened.

"I should say that there were not more than two or three," Wild replied.

"Well, they have got the best of us, for I can no longer hear them."

"Well, let them go for to-night, then. We will surely meet them again. Percy Pearsall is the sort of a man who does not give up very easily, if I am any judge of him. He will be looking for a chance to be revenged upon me."

"And you will be waiting for him to show himself."

"That's right. I want to take him alive if I can, for I have an idea that he and the surgeon at the Fort are responsible for all the robberies of the mail in this section. I have an idea that this Pony Express of ours is going to break up the business around here for a while. We must land Pearsall and Surgeon Leon where they belong, and after that it will be very easy to dispose of the rest."

"That's so," nodded Dart.

They rode on into Owl Flats without meeting any one.

As soon as they found that Emma Michels was safely under the protection of the troopers they went to their hotel and turned in.

CHAPTER XI.

WILD IN ANOTHER TIGHT PLACE.

The morning following Jim Dart started out with the mail, as usual, leaving Wild to take a rest at Owl Flats.

It had been left to Wild to arrange the hour of leaving with the mails to suit himself; all the contract called for was that they should be delivered on time.

Our hero resolved to spend a good portion of his resting spell in searching for Percy Pearsall.

He had written a letter to Surgeon Leon that morning in which he informed the villain that his step-daughter had been found, and invited him to get leave and come over to Owl Flats and see her, as she had decided not to return to her former home just then.

This was sent with the regular mail, and Young Wild West smiled softly as he thought of how astonished the surgeon would be to read the communication.

He knew the man would do anything but come over to Owl Flats, for Emma had told him everything she knew about the kidnapping scheme.

But Wild did think that the surgeon would surely seek the villain he had bargained with, and he meant to be on the lookout for the pair of them.

Shortly after Jim had gone he went over to the barracks and had a talk with David Lansing, the private, who had shown so much interest in the search for the missing girl.

He had insisted the night before that this man should have all the honors in the rescue of the maiden, and he told him he desired him to demand the reward that had been offered by the surgeon.

He brought up the subject again this morning by saying:

"Lansing, you must not forget to put in your claim for the reward. You were really the one who brought the girl away from the retreat of the outlaws. She got out herself, but you were the one who conveyed her to a place of safety. You claim this reward, and I will see that the scoundrel is forced to either pay it, or else leave the army in disgrace. I have a little influence with some of your superiors, and when I go over to the Fort, which I will do on my next trip with the mail, I am going to ask for a promotion for you."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Lansing earnestly. "I shall never forget you, Young Wild West."

"I think you are deserving of promotion, or I should not recommend it. You would make a good second lieutenant, I have an idea."

"Oh! it will be a long while before I get as high as that."

"Perhaps not such a long while; a month, say."

"Do you think you can bring that about, Mr. West?"

"I have an idea that I can. I am going to do my best at it. I have noticed that you and the young lady are very much interested in each other, and I know enough of the ways of the world to realize that it would not be good policy for you to marry on the salary of a private."

"I should say not," and Lansing blushed like a school-girl.

"I suppose you have been aspiring to be something above a common private in the ranks some day?"

"Yes; I hope soon to be a corporal, anyway."

"Well, how is your record as a private?"

"Very clean, I am proud to say."

"Good! Just leave the rest to me."

It was about noon on that same day when Wild was riding back to town after an unsuccessful search for Percy

Pearsall that he met the party of Indians who had held him up on his first trip with the mail.

One of them was a chief of the lower order, and when he saw who it was that halted among them he became very uneasy.

"Paleface have soldiers arrest Indians?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"No," answered Wild, "I did not bother about having you arrested. I thought I had punished you myself for the way you acted the other day."

"Paleface boy heap much brave. He carry the mails straight for the Great Father at Washington," said the chief, beginning to flatter the young Prince of the Saddle as only a red man can when he takes the notion.

"That is right, chief. You are a good Indian when you are asleep. I will give you the credit for that. Now, I want you to answer me a question or two."

"What paleface brave want to know?"

"Where is the man who has been robbing the stage coaches the past few months and taking the mail bags?"

"Me no know."

"Yes, you do know. He lived in a cave with six men who had squaws for their wives."

"Me know."

"I thought you did. It will be all the better for you if you tell me all you know about Captain Percy Pearsall."

"Me meet him this morning," said the Indian, after he had thought a moment.

"Yes, I supposed you did."

Wild said this, though he had not really thought so.

"He and another paleface go that way," and he pointed in the direction of Yellow Dust.

"How long ago, chief?"

"Two, three hours."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes. He take blanket from red men; paint his face and make look like red man."

"Ah! he has disguised himself, has he? Good!"

"He cut off squaw's hair and put on his head; stick feathers in like chief."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Then he ride off with other paleface, who fix himself like red man, too."

"Very good, chief. You can go on to Owl Flats, and if you behave yourselves, all of you, I won't say anything about what you did the other day."

The Indians seemed to be glad when they heard this, and they promptly made off.

"Well," mused Young Wild West, as he rode into town, "I have learned something this morning, anyway, for I feel that the redskin told me the truth. I wonder what he can be heading for Owl Flats for, unless it is to meet the surgeon? I must ride over there this afternoon and let Jim bring the mail back on the next trip. He will have enough rest, anyway, and can do it for this once. I want to be the one to bring the mail from Fort Unity to Yellow Dust

on Monday, anyway, so the order of things can be changed a little."

As soon as the boy had eaten his dinner he set out on his long ride along the trail to Yellow Dust.

Spitfire was in perfect condition, and the noble animal wanted to go faster than his young master cared to let him just then.

Wild meant to take it rather easy and reach the town about eight in the evening.

It would be rather nervy for Pearsall to go to Yellow Dust in disguise, unless it was a perfect one, and the boy could not bring himself to think it was a perfect one.

Wild rode on, and, without meeting any one on the road, reached Yellow Dust a little after eight in the evening.

Axter was surprised to see him when he came in the hotel, and he went and called Jim Dart, who was in the back room reading.

Jim was surprised to see him, too. He knew something must be in the wind.

But he did not say anything, leaving it to his chum to speak first.

"Well, what is new, Jim?" Wild asked when they were alone.

"Surgeon Leon has left the Fort, so we heard this afternoon," was the reply.

"Left, eh? How did it become known that he had left?"

"That I don't know exactly. It is a rumor, but I guess there is lots of truth in it. The four men who were here the night you had the muss have deserted, also."

"Ah! that looks suspicious. Now, I want to ask you a question. Have you seen anything of two fellows disguised as Indians any time to-day?"

"No. Why?"

Then Wild told him what he had learned.

Jim was very much surprised.

The two had a long talk, and finally they came to the conclusion that the villains were lurking around somewhere.

"They won't be apt to leave the vicinity of the trail," said Wild. "They will want to be revenged upon me before they do that. We must be mighty careful, Jim."

"You bet!"

"I guess I will borrow a fresh horse and ride over to the Fort. You will have to take the mail over to Owl Flats in the morning and bring it back. You can get a fresh horse over there."

"Yes, I can do it easy enough. It does not tire me to ride. I could keep it up for a whole week, if necessary."

"Well, as soon as I get something to eat I am going to ride over to the Fort."

He soon got what he wanted in the line of eating and drinking, and then he took the horse the landlord provided him with, and after leaving instructions that his horse should be ready for him when he came back, he sallied forth.

Somehow it occurred to the boy that he was going to have a lively time of it before he got back.

This got into his head so strongly that he could not shake off the feeling.

But never once did he change his mind about going.

He was always ready for a lively time, and as he had seen many of them, they were nothing new to him.

It was a moonlight night, and the horse he rode being a pretty good one, he rode fast.

Forty miles is not so much of a journey to one who was used to roughing it in the mountains and on the plains.

The nearer he got to the cabin of the hermit, the more determined our hero became to stop at it.

He had made sure that Gunnison was not in Yellow Dust before he set out, and that made him think that he might know something about the surgeon and the rest of the deserters.

The cabin might be a sort of headquarters for them.

Wild rode on through the moonlight, halting occasionally to listen, for he thought it might be possible that someone was following him.

But no such thing came to pass, and at length he came in sight of the lone cabin.

Halting a few yards from it, he tied his horse in a clump of trees and proceeded on foot to the little building.

There was no light coming from the windows, but that did not prevent him from going to the door.

After listening for a minute and not hearing anything to indicate that there was anybody inside, he gave a knock.

Almost instantly he heard someone stirring.

But whoever it might be, the door was not opened.

Wild gave another knock.

Then came the shuffling of hurried footsteps, and the next moment the door was unlocked and thrown open.

In the moonlight Wild saw the figure of Gunnison standing before him.

The old man's face was deathly pale and he was trembling violently.

Our hero pushed him gently aside and stepped into the cabin.

"I am so glad you are here to save me, Young Wild West!" cried Gunnison, bursting out excitedly. "They seen you comin', an' they made me——"

A pistol shot rang out, cutting the words short.

The hermit dropped to the floor with a bullet in his heart just as the light from a bull's-eye lantern was flashed in Wild's face.

Our hero caught a glimpse of five revolvers which were leveled at him, but nothing daunted, he opened fire, knowing full well that he had walked into a trap.

He shot a man dead in his tracks, but before he could again press the trigger of his six-shooter the weapon was knocked from his grasp and he was upset.

With a crash he landed upon the floor, and then half a dozen eager hands seized him.

"I guess we have got you now, my young Pony Express rider!" hissed the voice of Surgeon Leon. "You have come to your doom, Young Wild West!"

Wild made a violent struggle to free himself from them, but it was useless.

They held him down and quickly disarmed him.

"Tie him up and gag him," said the surgeon; and the four men with him were those who had deserted to link their fortunes with him in a career of crime.

There was plenty of rope handy, and they soon had our hero lying helpless on the floor.

"Now, then, Young Wild West," remarked the scoundrel, as he proceeded to make an improvised gag from a piece of the bed clothing he found in the room, "have you anything to say before you roast alive?"

"Do your worst!" exclaimed Wild. "You will find that I will never beg for mercy from such as you. I might inform you, though, before you gag me, that your step-daughter has been found and that she is in safe hands."

"You need not tell me that; I imagined that such was the case. I also imagined that you were going to break up my little business enterprise, and I have been waiting here for you to come along, for something seemed to tell me that you would come."

As the villain said this he glared at the helpless boy with fury in his eyes.

"Young Wild West, your doom is sealed," he went on. "You have meddled with business that did not concern you, and you are going to roast alive for doing so. It was a sorry day for you when you agreed to carry the mails from Fort Unity to Owl Flats. When you took that step you entered into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I would like to be able to hear your cries as you take your departure from the green earth, but there are others who might hear and come to your help; so I will gag you."

Without anything further the gag was placed in the helpless boy's mouth, and then, rising to his feet, the scoundrel turned to his companions and said:

"Set the cabin on fire, men! He has shot one of us, and we will let the body be cremated along with that of the old man whose greed for money brought on his death. Have you got the hermit's treasure?"

"Yes," came the reply from one of the deserters.

"Then light the bunch of rags and paper, and we will away to meet Percy Pearsall and his men!"

The next minute the entire interior of the cabin was in a blaze, and Young Wild West was left to a horrible fate!

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

When Young Wild West saw the blaze all around him he was on the verge of giving himself up for lost.

As hopeful and courageous as he was, it seemed that death certainly was at hand now.

He struggled as he never had before to break the bonds, and the efforts he made to cry for help were something fierce.

Surgeon Leon was last to leave the burning cabin, and

as he went he cast one look of diabolical satisfaction at the struggling boy on the floor.

"Good-bye, Young Wild West!" he called out. "In a few minutes you will begin to roast! I wish you a pleasant journey to the bourne from which no traveler returns!"

The rags and papers that had been piled up burned rapidly, and as Leon disappeared from the view of the agonized Prince of the Saddle the bed clothing became ignited.

As the bed that had been used by the hermit was but three feet from Wild, it seemed that it would soon be all over with him.

But man proposes, God disposes!

That is an old saying that is as true as it is old.

Above the crackling of the flames Young Wild West suddenly heard the sounds of firing.

There was magic in the sound, it seemed, for the brave boy did something he had not thought of before.

He began rolling his body towards the door.

Right through a blazing mass of paper he went, regardless of setting his clothes on fire.

He reached the door in an exhausted condition, only to find that it had been closed.

"Heaven help me!" thought Young Wild West. "Unless help comes quickly I am surely doomed!"

But Young Wild West was not destined to die in such a cruel and heartless manner.

Though the fringe on his buckskin trousers had become ignited, and the flames were all around him, there was help at hand.

Suddenly the door opened against him with such force as to send him rolling over into the blaze, and then—

A pair of hands seized him and dragged him out into the open air.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the voice of Jim Dart. "Wild, old fellow, I am on time!"

Then Jim, for it was surely he, began beating out the fire that had taken possession of the boy's clothing.

And he succeeded before even a small blister had been burned.

Wild, perfectly conscious of what was taking place, felt himself dragged away from the scorching flames; then the gag was torn from his mouth and a keen knife severed the bonds that held him powerless.

The blaze from the burning cabin lit up the scene as with the glare of the noonday sun, and as Wild got upon his feet he gave a quick glance around for a sight of his enemies.

But they were gone!

"Thank you, Jim!" he said, seizing his chum by the hand. "You were just in time."

"And I am just as glad as you are that I was," was the fervent reply. "Something told me to follow you to-night, and I did so. I am sorry the scoundrels got away, but I had to get you out of that blaze. I wounded one of them, though, I am quite certain."

"How did you know I was in the cabin?"

"I didn't know it, but I thought you must be when I saw

the glare of the fire and caught a glimpse of four men mounting their horses to ride away."

"And then you opened fire on them?"

"Yes. I knew they must have set the place on fire, or they would not be leaving the scene so quickly; and I also came to the conclusion that you were inside the cabin, so I just let them have it. They never answered my shots, but rode on in the direction of Yellow Dust as fast as they could get their horses to go."

"Well, nothing can save the cabin now. There are two bodies inside it, too. One is that of Gunnison and the other is that of one of the deserters from the Fort. The surgeon shot the hermit, and I dropped the other fellow before they downed me. I was taken completely by surprise, and it was no use. If I had known those fellows were in there when I knocked at the door I would surely have dropped or captured the whole five of them."

"Well, I suppose we had better try and catch them, hadn't we?"

"Yes."

"Where is your horse?"

"Right over behind those trees over there."

Jim Dart shook his head at this.

"That is where the villains started from," said he.

Jim caught his horse by the bridle, and then Wild led the way to the clump of trees.

His horse was not there!

"They have taken the horse with them!" he cried. "Well, they have just the least bit the best of it yet, but I will win out in spite of them—see if I don't! I am alive yet; and that is more than they expect, no doubt."

"What will we do now?" queried Dart, who was at a loss which way to proceed.

"The best thing we can do is to ride over to the Fort. Then all three of us will start out with the mail. We will change horses at Yellow Dust as we go, and do the same coming back, if it is necessary for us all to come back. I am going to wind up the career of the mail robbers before I am twenty-four hours' older. Surgeon Leon and his men will meet Percy Pearsall, just as sure as two and two are four. We must hunt them now to the finish."

"And carry the mail at the same time."

"Certainly. We must get the mail through on time, no matter what happens."

When they had made sure that Wild's horse was nowhere to be found, the pair of them got upon Jim's steed and set out for Fort Unity.

They proceeded at an easy pace, as they did not wish to overtax the animal.

The Fort was reached in due time, and the officer in charge was much surprised to see them.

But when he heard all that had happened to them he was astonished.

"So it has sifted down to this state, has it?" he observed.

"Well, I guess Surgeon Leon will not get very far. I will send out a detachment at once to scour the country for him."

"And we will see what we can do when we start out with the mail in the morning," added Wild.

The next morning at daybreak Young Wild West, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart stood waiting for the mail bags.

The mail from the east had come in late the night before, and it had taken some little time to sort and get ready what was to go on the route.

Wild had been furnished with a good horse, but he was waiting till he got upon the back of his own Spitfire once more.

"The villains will surely be laying for us," he told the officer in charge. "The surgeon no doubt thinks it was possible for me to escape from the burning building, and he will run any sort of a risk to have his revenge. It is the same way with Pearsall; he will leave no stone unturned till he gets satisfaction, or is killed or captured. We will meet them surely, if the detachment you sent out to hunt them up does not catch them."

"Well, if you do come across them, bring the deserters in alive, if any way possible," was the reply. "Now, then, off with you! The mail must get through on time, you know."

Wild had the mail bags swung over the borrowed horse, and he led the way, while the soldiers at the Fort uttered a cheer.

There was something very dashing about the handsome young Prince of the Saddle, and no wonder he excited the admiration of the crowd!

When our three friends reached the scene of the fire they found a detachment that had been sent out half an hour before tearing away the ashes and debris, so they could recover the charred bodies.

Young Wild West did not stop there.

He was in a hurry to get through with the mail—or get as far as he could with it before he met his enemies.

If he did meet them, there would be more or less of a delay.

On thundered the three riders, and Yellow Dust grew gradually nearer.

And all the while they were on the alert for danger.

They did not know at what minute a bullet would come whistling past their ears from some hidden quarter.

Their horses were steaming and flecked with foam when they drew up in front of the Axter House, at Yellow Dust.

In less than five minutes they changed horses, and then proceeded on their way.

Wild had taken time to ask the landlord if he had seen anything of the ones he hoped to meet, but received a reply in the negative.

The young dead-shot was now mounted on his swift steed Spitfire.

He felt more at home when the sorrel was under him.

When they had ridden about fifteen miles, a puff of smoke suddenly came from a little grove on their left, and a report followed.

Neither of the three heard the whizz of a bullet, so they concluded that it had been badly aimed, if they were the target.

Another shot followed a few seconds later, and this time a bullet hit Cheyenne Charlie's horse in the shoulder and dropped the animal, the rider being thrown over its head.

"Ah!" exclaimed Young Wild West; "now the fun begins. Just drop a couple of shots there, boys!"

Jim obeyed instantly, and as soon as Charlie got up he followed suit.

A wild yell rang out at this, and the next instant a mixed crowd of a dozen men came dashing toward them from the cover of the trees.

Some of them were Indians and some whites, the latter in the majority, Wild's practiced eye told him.

It was in a little hollow where they had halted, and with the utmost coolness Young Wild West ordered his horse to lie down.

It would be a very poor horse of the frontier that did not know what the command to lie down meant, especially when it came from its master.

Spitfire obeyed just as if he had been a dog.

Jim had a little more difficulty in getting his steed down.

It was not his own, and that made it harder for him.

But the horse got down after a few seconds, with the bullets from the advancing foe whistling all around him.

"Boys!" exclaimed Young Wild West, "when I give the word I want you to begin on that gang. Charlie, you take the man on the left and shoot toward the right; Jim, you begin in the center and shoot on both sides. I will take care of the other end."

The bullets were flying around them like hail now, but they were not the least disconcerted.

They knew it was hard for the villains to hit them from their horses while they crouched in the hollow.

"Now give it to them!"

As our hero gave the word three rifles began cracking.

The villains must have been desperate—so desperate, in fact, that they lost all caution, for they were riding in a semi-circle to certain destruction.

At the first three shots as many of them tumbled from the saddle.

Crack! crack! crack!

Three more went down before they could turn from their onward rush.

"Steady now!" said Wild; "they have all got to go under or be captured. I see the surgeon and Percy Pearsall

among them. Pearsall is disguised as an Indian, but he can't fool me."

"Me, either," answered Charlie.

"I can tell him, too," Jim observed.

"Drop them all but the two, then, if they keep on coming!"

They did keep on coming, and in less than ten seconds all the saddles but two were emptied.

The two, who had at last concluded that it was life or death with them now, were Pearsall and Leon.

Wild was on his horse's back in a twinkling.

He was going to run them down.

The desperate villains, having emptied their rifles, now began firing their revolvers at the pursuing boy.

But they were simply wasting their shots.

Wild was waiting for them to do this.

One minute later, and he saw them in the act of reloading their weapons.

"Stop that!" he called out, leveling his rifle at them. "Surrender now, or you will both be dead men!"

The villains thought he surely meant to shoot, so they gave up.

Fifteen minutes later they were bound to the backs of their horses and on their way to Fort Unity, under the charge of Jim Dart and Cheyenne Charlie, who had easily found a horse to suit him from those that were galloping around riderless.

Young Wild West went on through with the mail to Owl Flats.

That was the last of the mail robbers in that section of the country.

Young Wild West's Pony Express had been a success, and it had also been the means of breaking up a dangerous gang and bringing a traitor to the Government to his just deserts.

Emma Michels had no recourse to go to law with her step-father, for he was found guilty at a court-martial and shot, as was Percy Pearsall.

The latter made a clean breast of everything before he died, showing what a perfidious villain the surgeon had been.

There is nothing more to add to this story, except that Young Wild West and his two partners ran the Pony Express to the end of the month, and received the money Wild's contract called for.

And during that time they never once failed in "Getting the Mail Through on Time."

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST ON THE BIG DIVIDE; OR, THE RAID OF THE RENEGADES," which will be the next number (35) of "Wild West Weekly."

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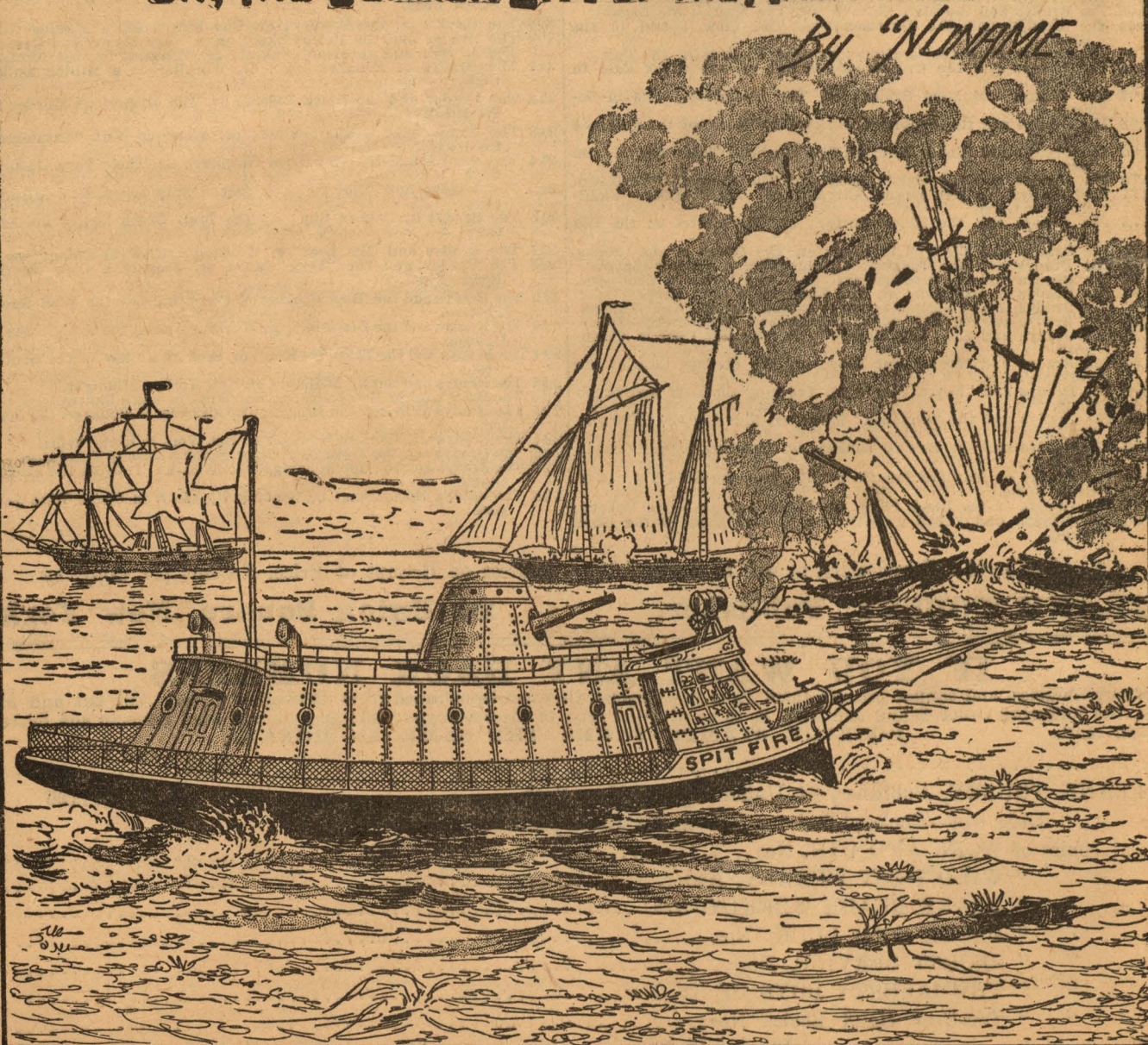
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